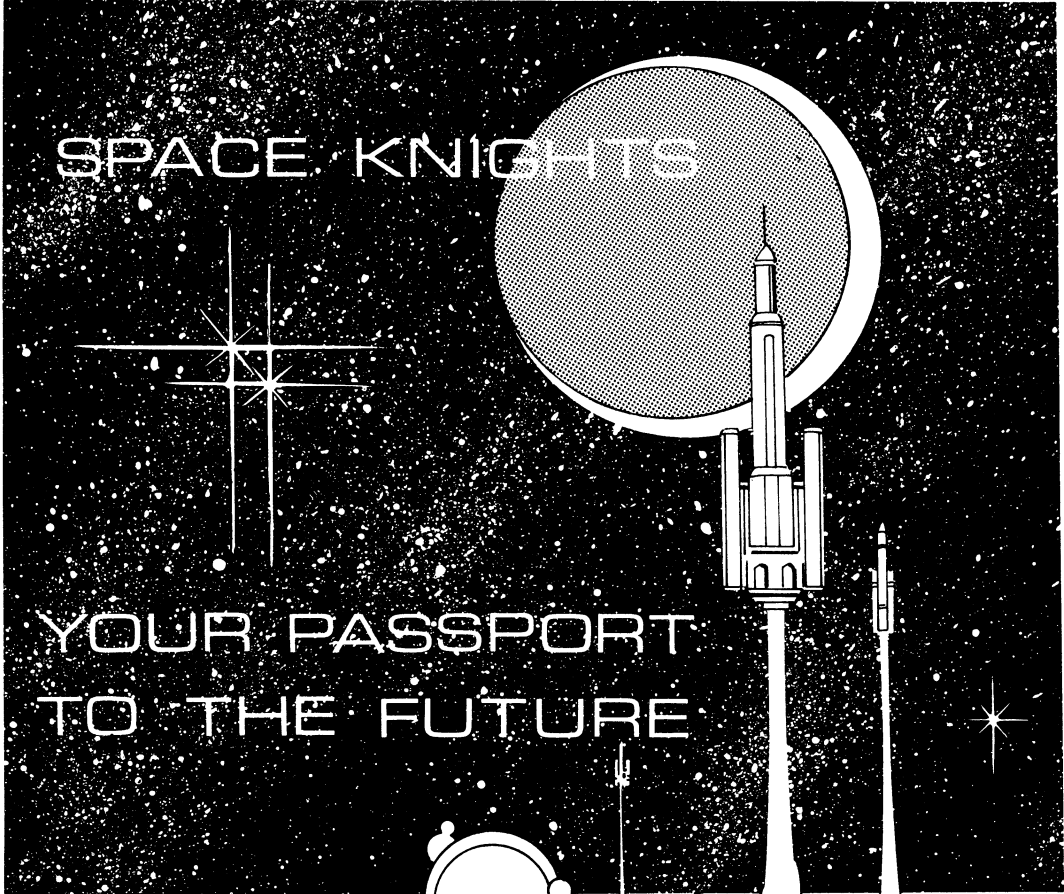


SPACE KNIGHTS

David Heller
Robert Kurcina





SPACE KNIGHTS

YOUR PASSPORT
TO THE FUTURE

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Created and written by: **DAVID L. HELLER**

Programmed by: **ROBERT KURCINA**

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≡ CHAPTER 1 ≡

JAKE

Jake lay on his back on the top berth of the doubledeck bunk. He clasped his hands behind his head and lazily watched a small spider weave its intricate web between a wooden support beam and the corner of the ceiling.

His dark hair was closely cropped, sideburns precisely trimmed to regulation length. Three years ago he had been a “skinhead”; now he was a senior, about to graduate. He rolled over on his side and looked down at Jenkins and Wills energetically spit-shining their black shoes. They worked on the shoes with the same high level of concentration Jake applied to his navigation problems. He didn’t understand why they shined their shoes until they gleamed with a mirror-like finish, or removed every piece of lint from their uniforms and then, taking a rolled up piece of adhesive tape, patted their uniforms clean again—and again, and again. They spent hours ironing their dress pants until the creases stood out like two starched knives. “Why do they do it?” he asked himself. He would never understand their quest for perfection in things he considered so petty.

He smiled to himself, realizing that after tomorrow he would leave this crazy world behind. Tomorrow was graduation and after that, he would be a commander. The commander of his own ship. Master of his own destiny. The thought excited him, made his heart beat a little faster.

He closed his eyes and saw himself standing smartly on the bridge of a sleek cruiser, on patrol in an uncharted sector of the galaxy, in command. A flash of doubt crossed his mind. “I could be assigned to a garbage scow . . . No”, he assured himself, “that couldn’t happen.” He tried to gauge his standing in the class. Top ten percent in armament

and weaponry. Command ability . . . well, he had to be honest. He rated his ability to lead just slightly above average. His flight instructor, Lieutenant Winston, had once called him the “lone wolf.”

But being a loner wasn’t necessarily bad, he thought. “Maybe I’ll be assigned to a smaller vessel. A ship with a gallant mission. A fast, sleek destroyer like the *Manta*—shaped like a manta ray, black, and deadly.”

“After tomorrow’s ceremony I’ll be given the serum, lowered into a gleaming stainless steel capsule. The lid will seal tightly from above and, while I sleep, the temperature will gradually be lowered.” He visualized himself floating in suspended animation while his sleek ship raced outwards to the farthest reaches of the universe. He would remain in suspended animation to awaken on . . . the interior of the ship was just beginning to form in his mind.

The door slammed loudly. Sergeant Burly stormed into the barracks, looking like a bloated, angry frog. “All right you bums, you’re not officers yet.” He looked up at Jake and scowled. “Get your butt off that rack, Stinger, and haul it outside.” Jake didn’t move. “Now!” Burly shouted. He lifted a silver whistle to his lips and blew it shrilly. Jake jumped to the floor, pushed his white peaked hat firmly into place, smoothed out his creased uniform and ran out the door, taking his place at the rear of the formation.

The forty individuals of Company Alpha looked like pegs in a cribbage board as they stood motionless in four perfect rows of ten. It was a hot, windless day. The midday sun bounced cruelly off the white cement tarp. It stung their eyes and poured heat mercilessly into their dark blue uniforms. They stood rigidly straight—all heads squarely forward, arms straight down, palms turned inward with thumbs touching the side seams of their pants. Their highly polished shoes reflected the brilliance of the white, hot sun.

Burly walked slowly through the ranks, looking into each man’s blank eyes. The angry scowl never left his face as he appraised each man’s uniform. He paused to adjust a cadet’s crooked tie or straighten a tilted hat. Out of the corner of his eye, Jake watched Burly approach. The fat sergeant stopped, looked Jake squarely in the eyes, and whispered, “Garbage scow for you, Stinger.” A smile spread across his face. “The fix is in.”

Before Jake had time to respond, Burly had moved past him. The sergeant walked nonchalantly to the front of the Company and began talking. Jake didn’t hear. He fought to control a rage of hatred that was on the brink of explosion. “Not fair,” he thought. “They’re supposed to assign the goof-offs to scow duty. In three years, I haven’t received more than four demerits. That stupid slob’s jealous. So I didn’t spend half my life shining shoes and perfectly creasing my pants. I still made it through training with flying colors.” Jake gnashed his teeth. “He’s

bluffing. Just trying to get my goat," he reasoned. "They use MAX to evaluate cadets and issue assignments because the computer's impartial. There's no way Burly can fix that."

"Stinger!" Burly shouted. "Do you or don't you?"

Jake's mind snapped back to the parade ground. "Sir?"

"Stinger, weren't you here when I asked who needed time off this evening to visit relatives?"

"Ah. Yes, sir."

"What does that mean, Stinger?"

"Yes, sir, I would like time off this evening. Sir."

"Then why didn't you raise your hand the first time?" Burly didn't wait for an answer. "Never mind. I don't have time to shoot the breeze. Just—and this applies to all you bums—just be back in barracks no later than 2100." He looked up and down the ranks. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted back in unison.

"All right." He paused, making them sweat a few moments longer, then shouted, "Dismissed!"

They fell out of formation, talking and laughing excitedly. "Did you see Stinger?" Jenkins said. "Always lost in thought." He turned and shouted at Jake. "Hey Stinger," he taunted. "Goin' to see momma tonight?"

All the pent-up rage Jake had held inside came pouring out. "Jenkins!" he shouted, clenching both fists. "At least I have a mother. You were hatched. Like a Gammalon. You creep!" Jake's expression was wild and crazed. His wiry frame was tensed and rigid. His face was red. The muscles of his neck were taut.

"I don't have to take that, you twerp." The tall blonde slammed his fist squarely into his open palm. "Come and get it . . . momma's boy. I've been waiting three years to let you have it."

They stood ten yards apart. The company had formed a ring around the two as they shouted threats. Beazle, the shortest and slyest cadet, started hustling bets. "I've got five that says Jenkins'll knock his block off." He looked around. "Who'll take me up on it?" There were no takers. The men silently waited for the fight to begin.

"Well," Jenkins taunted, "I'm still waiting."

Jake turned and looked into each face as he spoke. "All right. We've spent three years together. So, I didn't spend ninety percent of my time spit-shining my shoes, and I got fewer demerits than any of you." He shouted in frustration, "The hell with it!" He gruffly pushed his way out of the ring and walked stiffly towards the barracks, feeling thirty-nine sets of eyes fixed on his back.

Jenkins, bent on satisfaction, started to follow. "You're not getting off that easy, Stinger!" Wills, a short, pudgy redhead, grabbed Jenkins' arm in a vise-like grip.

Wills' deceptive appearance hid powerful arms honed to steel by

his daily weight lifting. "Let him go, Jenkins. You're not going to prove anything by getting into a fight the day before graduation."

The word "graduation" seemed to have a sobering effect on Jenkins. He pushed against Wills' hand. "O.K., I'll let it pass, this time." He focused on Jake's retreating back and shouted, "You'll never get anywhere Stinger, if you don't straighten up! I'm telling you for your own good!"

"Yeah, sure," Jake muttered to himself as he walked into the barracks, slamming the door behind him. His whole body shook as he tried to control his tension. He wanted to shout. He wanted to cry, but he knew he couldn't show any emotion. He sensed that the men outside were poised like a pack of wild dogs, ready to pounce on him if he showed any fear.

He quickly stuffed the contents of his locker into his canvas carry-bag and slung it over his shoulder. He steeled himself, then slowly opened the door. They were still out there, waiting silently. He looked straight ahead, eyes out of focus, not really seeing, and walked stiffly away from them, hugging the side of the barracks building.

Jenkins shouted after him. "Running away from home, Stinger?" Jake spun around and shouted back, "I'm going to spend the night in the Reserve barracks. At least they've got some class!" He turned and continued walking.

He rounded the corner and marched steadily ahead. He stumbled into Reserve Building IV and closed the door quietly. The room was dark, cool and deserted. "They must be out on maneuvers," he thought. He dropped the canvas bag, then leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. He crossed his arms over his knees, bent his head forward and let tears flow silently down his cheeks.

"Hey. You all right?" A female voice penetrated his thoughts. "What are you doing in here?"

He rubbed his eyes against his sleeves and looked up. Baggy khaki fatigues, three sizes too large for her small frame, made her look like a little girl dressed up in her daddy's old yard clothes. There was a black smudge of grease on her pointy chin. Her round eyes surveyed him calmly. Her broad smile and innocent acceptance reminded him of his kid sister, Mitzi. She bent forward, offering her hand. He clasped it warmly as he rose to his feet.

"You must be lost, cadet. This is the girl's dorm." She smiled. "If you're caught, we'll both be in for it." She paused and added, "But it might be worth it. What's your name?"

He brushed off his uniform. "Jake Stinger. What do you mean, girl's dorm? This is the Reserve barracks, isn't it?"

She laughed. "Oh, Stinger, you're batting 500. This is a Reserve barracks. You've got that much right. But"—she patted him on the shoulder—"Fem Cadet Reserve Group IV."

"Oh, no. Of all the . . ." And he began laughing wildly.

"Hey, it's not that funny."

He regained his composure. "Of all the crazy things to happen," he thought, then said, "I graduate tomorrow. If they find me in here, it's curtains. Finito! I'd better slide." He picked up the carry-bag and slung it over his shoulder. He smiled broadly and bowed slightly. "It's been a pleasure." He walked to the door and inched it open.

"Oh, no!" He yanked it shut. "There's a whole troop of women marching towards the barracks. What do I do now?"

Her face drained of color. "Follow me. And quick!" She turned and raced up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. He followed her to the second floor. She stopped in the middle of a cot-filled room and pointed towards the ceiling. "See that hatchway?"

He was out of breath. "You mean . . . that . . . over there?"

"You'll have to climb on my bunk to reach it."

"O.K." He threw his bag onto the upper bunk and pulled himself up. As he stood balancing on the sagging mattress, reaching for the hatch above, he heard a door open downstairs and the sound of laughing women. He frantically pushed up on the small hatchway. "It's stuck." He reached down and picked up his bag, held it above his head, and hurled it at the hatch.

He fought to retain his balance as the small wooden hatch flew into the attic. He pushed the bag into the hole, then gripped the side of the wooden frame, and chinned himself up through the hatch. He bent over and poked his head out of the square hole. "My parents are waiting for me at the Reunion Center and I'm supposed to be back in my barracks by 2100. What do I do now?"

She scratched her head and looked up, "If I were you, Stinger, I'd close that hatch."

He pulled his head up and started to put the cover in place, then thought better of it and leaned forward again. "By the way. What's your name?"

"Tommy Crescent." She blew him a kiss. "I hope you enjoy your accommodations." She glanced towards the top of the stairs, then back at Jake. "Close it. Here they come!"

He carefully slid the hatch into place and looked around. The building was more than one hundred years old, still in use because the military felt that living in a primitive environment "builds character." Rows of evenly spaced wooden two-by-four beams stretched over the length of the ceiling structure below him. Pink fiberglass insulation material was fitted between each set of parallel beams. The roof was peaked and on the two end walls, louvered vents admitted dim shadowed streaks of slatted light.

He balanced himself between two wooden beams above the small hatch, afraid that if he moved he would crash down through the

plasterboard ceiling into the female-filled room below. The air was dusty and hot. He loosened his tie and thought out his next move. Luckily, his carry-bag was straddling two of the beams, but he couldn't spend the night lying that way. "I'll end up with permanent creases in my back," he thought.

He looked up and down the length of the attic. An eighteen-inch wide strip of plywood ran down the side of the structure where the peaked roof mated with the wooden beams. "That strip of plywood will have to be my bed." He lifted himself into a butt-up pushup position and carefully balanced his hands on the forward beam, his feet on the one behind. Then, looking like a four-legged spider, he cautiously inched his way sideways toward the plywood strip. Halfway to his goal, his arms began to shake. He collapsed, exhausted, across the two beams to rest.

His ear pressed against the pink insulation. The fiberglass tickled, irritating his ear and the side of his head. He was too exhausted to move. Above his pounding heartbeat and raspy breathing, he could hear the sound of women talking below. The bellowing voice of the company sargeant reached his ear loud and clear. "All right, you Fems, lights out in twenty minutes! If I catch anyone uttering so much as a peep, it'll mean K.P. and head duty for a week." There was a brief moment of silence, then she shouted, "Is that understood?"

"Yes ma'am!" was the chorused reply. Then, he heard the sound of heavy boots descending the stairs, followed by the sharp crack of a slammed door.

The room below filled with raucous laughter, a jumble of voices all talking at once.

Jake took a few deep breaths, then lifted himself and continued his awkward sideways crawl. He reached the corner, gingerly lowering his weight onto the strip of plywood, then slowly rolled over on his back and stretched out. The thin platform was barely wide enough to accommodate his body, and he shifted until his left side was touching the wall.

He put both hands under his head and closed his eyes. A picture of his parents formed in his mind: Dad, bald, wearing glasses, in need of a shave, and yelling at his short, blonde mother, "I knew that kid was rotten! We come all the way out here to see him off and he doesn't even have the courtesy to show up!"

"Jack, aren't you the slightest bit worried? All you think about is yourself, your inconvenience. He is your son, after all!"

Jake could almost picture his father's face turning red. "He's a bum! I work my tail off to get him into Space Academy, and do you think he would show any consideration? No! Not one letter in three years. Just phone calls." His eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head as he yelled, "And he always reverses the charges!"

Jake's mind cut off his father's screaming, replacing it with the

black quiet of space. He was looking out the forward viewpoint of his speeding space ship. Bright white stars and rainbow-colored swirling galaxies streaked past the screen. He felt the reassuring vibration of the powerful engines and heard their soft, muted hum. Then, he heard a knock.

He opened his eyes and quickly turned on his side. There was a scraping sound, then a beam of light temporarily blinded him. He shielded his eyes and lay motionless. His heart began to pound. He clenched and unclenched his left fist. "Jake." The call was just a whisper. "Jake. Where are you? It's Tommy." The beam of light swung frantically about the attic.

He pushed himself up and half whispered, half yelled, "Over here."

The light moved over him. "Jake. It's O.K. The Wicked Witch of the West is gone. She won't be back until tomorrow morning. I've told the girls all about you. Come on down. You can't spend the night in the attic."

"I can't see where I'm going." She pointed the light in front of him and he laboriously struggled back to the hatch, then lowered himself to stand on the bunk next to her.

"Ladies." Her face beamed. "I'd like you to meet Cadet Jake Stinger. Not much the worse for wear, for all his adventures!" She lowered herself and sat on the edge of the upper bunk, dangling both legs down. She pulled on his arm and he sat down next to her.

"Mr. Stinger is about to graduate. About to enter the elite corp of the selected few. About to venture forth into the cosmos, on a mission of great import." The women of Reserve Corp IV lay in their bunks facing Tommy and Jake, resting their heads in their hands or leaning against bent arms.

Tommy turned to Jake. "We've decided not to sleep tonight. One of the girls suggested we make you our mascot." There was a muffled giggle from the Company. "But we'd really like to find out more about the Academy. Jake"—her voice was hopeful and expectant. "We've only been here two months. What's it like really to make it?" The pitch of her voice became high and excited. "To become a real Space Knight?"

Jake turned his head and looked into the young faces around him. He was humbled by their attention, attention he felt he didn't deserve. He examined his hands self-consciously and carefully phrased each word. "I," he paused. "... I've been here three years." He raised his head and looked at Tommy. "It's been rough. I've put up with all the B.S. I got up every morning at four-thirty. I put up with being called a bum, a jerk and worse. I've had my share of abuse." The memory of Clause, his head covered by a trash can, being told to repeat and repeat that he was nothing but garbage, flashed through Jake's mind. "But, in the end ... now, it all seems worth it. I've hung in."

His voice raised to a higher pitch. "I've made it through the obstacle

course.” He looked into each face. “And tomorrow I graduate,” he said proudly. “But graduation isn’t an end in itself. It’s what happens after graduation. Not the glory. Not just the fact that I’ll be helping the colonists survive. It’s deeper than that.” He tilted his head forwards and looked at his hands. “This training, this grueling experience, will allow me, allow you”—he raised his head—“all of you, to do something worthwhile for yourselves.” He paused. “To be your own person. To fulfill your destiny. To . . .” His mind went blank. He couldn’t think of anything else to say, and he wondered why he had said so much. He turned self-consciously to Tommy. “You understand, don’t you?”

The room was silent, as if devoid of life. Tommy touched his hand and simply said, “Yes.”

Jake was drained. His words echoed in his ears. “Do I believe all that?” he asked himself. “I said it . . . maybe I do. Maybe I do believe that out there, I’ll find myself.” Then, he spoke to Tommy. “Enough of the heavies. Enough of the abstract. I graduate tomorrow, I haven’t seen my parents—who, by the way, are probably having a fit and . . . oh, I don’t know.”

“Jake”—she squeezed his hand—“we’ll never forget you . . . and don’t worry, tomorrow will work out just fine.” She looked at her young comrades. “Right, cadets?”

A heavy-set brunette in the adjacent bunk winked at Jake, then rolled over to go to sleep. “See, Jake, they agree. No problem.”

He began, “But—” She put her finger to his lips. “I’ll sleep with Darla, you take my bunk. They all go to chow at five-thirty. I’ll stay behind and help you get ready for your big day. O.K.?”

“I—”

“Goodnight, Jake. We’ll talk tomorrow.” He pulled himself up onto her bunk and fell, exhausted, into a deep sleep within minutes.

* * * * *

“Come on, Ronda, hustle!”

“Hey, leave that alone! That’s my towel. Get your own.”

“Blast off, Carol! Why do you always have to hog the mirror?”

Jake pulled the covers over his head. He heard Tommy’s impatient voice. “Can’t you guys move it? Jake’s got to make it to his graduation ceremony!”

“All right, all right already,” a squeaky voice replied. “I’m going as fast as I can. You know, it’s four-thirty in the morning.”

Jake thought they would never leave. He was supercharged with energy, filled with excitement. He wanted to leap out of the bunk, dress, and escape to his barracks to join the morning formation. Each minute he spent in the bunk was agonizing. He opened and closed his fists nervously, trying to relieve the building tension. He couldn’t take it

anymore. He ripped the covers off his head and bolted upright. He looked around. Most of the girls had left the barracks. Only Tommy and a lanky blonde remained.

The tall girl stood in front of a wall mirror, pouting her lips as she carefully penciled a beauty mark on her chin. "Carol!" Tommy shook the girls' shoulder. "Who do you think you're going to meet at the mess hall? Star Fleet Commander Drake?"

Carol spun around, stared coldly at Tommy, then stormed out, slamming the door.

Tommy glanced at her watch. "Jake, It's five-fifteen! Here." She threw him a towel and a bar of soap. "I'll wait out front while you get washed and changed." She reached the door, then turned. "Oh, my locker's over there, number 20. There's a razor on the top shelf. If you need anything else, I'll be right outside the door."

After she had gone, Jake hurriedly washed, shaved with Tommy's dull razor, then rummaged around in his carry-bag. "Regulations sometimes work out," he thought as he laid out his neatly rolled pants and white woolen jersey. He dressed quickly and walked to the mirror, adjusting his hat. "Tommy! Come on in. I'm about ready to go."

She stopped at the doorway. "You look sharp." She smiled. "I almost didn't recognize you." She walked to him and took both his hands in hers. "Well, goodbye, Jake. Please remember me when you're racing about the universe."

He looked down and smiled. "How could I ever forget? I think I'll remember these past hours as long as I live." He bent forward and kissed her on the forehead. He stood straight, pulling his hands from hers. "Destiny awaits, and I'm running a little late." He looked into her face and felt the sadness and longing in her eyes. "Goodbye, Tommy." He turned and walked out the door without looking back.

It was dark outside. The air bit into his face and white, steamy puffs streamed from his mouth as he jogged down the center of the deserted road. He rounded the corner and stopped. Company A was just beginning to fall into ranks in front of his barracks. He tucked in his woolen jersey, straightened his hat, and walked nonchalantly to the rear of the formation. He was relieved. No one noticed him.

They all seemed nervously absorbed and strangely quiet.

Burly walked to the front of the ranks and the men snapped to attention. He paced back and forth as he spoke. "You look tough! You look lean and mean! You look like Space Knights!" Jake fought hard to hold back a smile.

Burly stopped and put his hands behind his back. A smile crossed his face, the first he had ever shown. He cleared his throat. "I've gotten to know all of you men these past three years." He paused, rocked back and forth on his heels and continued, "You're like family to me. I'm very proud of you. All of you." He straightened his back and forced out the words. "I'm going to miss you."



Burly walked to the front of the ranks and the men snapped to attention. "You look tough! You look mean! You look like Space Knights!"

He bent his head forward and addressed the ground. "I've never been out there. Never been off Terra." He looked up and finished in a hearty military tone. "Good luck, men."

"Ten hut!" Burly yelled. "We march straight to the parade grounds. No breakfast today. You'll be in deep freeze by three o'clock this afternoon. Remember, you're the men from Company A. Remember your roots and be proud of them." The muscles of his neck stretched as he shouted, "Who are you?"

"Company A!" they shouted.

"Wrong!" he shouted back. "As of today, you're Space Knights, and never forget it! Let's try it again. Are you tough?"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted.

"Are you lean?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Are you mean?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Who are you?"

"Space Knights!"

"Who?"

"Space Knights!!"

"Who?"

They reached a high pitch of excitement, screaming "Space Knights!" repeatedly at the top of their lungs. Burly raised his arms and yelled out, "All right! Right . . . face!"

The company turned smartly to the right. He yelled, "Forward . . . march!" and they stepped off, swinging their arms in unison. Burly marched smartly at the side of the formation. "Men. Let let them hear who you are!" He shouted the marching cadence. "One!" They shouted back, "One!"

He shouted, "Two!" and they shouted back.

"Three!" Then, "Four!" Then, "One, two, three, four" in rapid succession.

They were singing, "We are Space Knights, yes we are," as they marched across the deserted landing strip towards the reviewing stand.

The forty men marched directly into the sun that rose like a giant orange fireball over the edge of the broad concrete plateau. Jake's feet kept pace with the company. His voice sung the Space Knights song in perfect cadence, while thoughts raced wildly through his head. "The sun," he thought. "For so many years, I've taken it for granted. I may never see it again, and . . ."

Burly shouted, "Column right!" Jake's feet automatically shifted a half-step to the right and continued marching forward.

Jake's mind picked up where it had left off. He knew that he would see thousands of other suns, but they could never compare to the familiar globe rising in front of him . . . his sun. Then, his mind jumped to a vision of his parents, and his little sister Mitzi. His stomach tightened. He would never see them again. He had bungled his last chance, wasted it huddled in the attic of an ancient barracks. Tommy's smudged face formed in his mind as Burly shouted, "Company. Halt!"

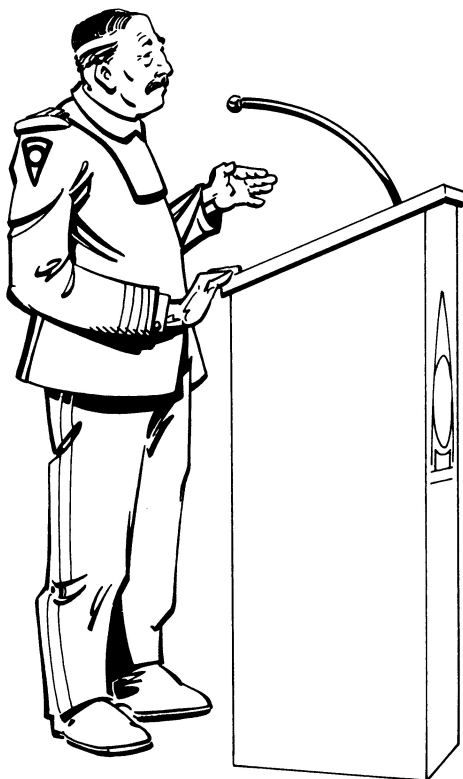
They stood at attention in front of a deserted wooden reviewing stand. The Corp felt it was bad for morale to have relatives on hand.

A light wind played across two blue-and-gold flags planted on both sides of a small wooden speaker's rostrum. The rostrum appeared lonely, standing naked in front of the reviewing stand, as if it were waiting for a speaker to fulfill its destiny.

Jake's legs were becoming fatigued and he shifted his weight imperceptibly from one foot to the other. "Where are they?" he thought. As if on cue, an aged, bent man, wearing the blue and gold of an Admiral, appeared from behind the stands and walked slowly to the rostrum. He stepped up and blew into the microphone. Two gigantic speakers, mounted on poles at the top of the stand, squealed and screeched. The Admiral reached below the rostrum, then brought his hand up and tapped the microphone. "Testing. Testing, one two three. Testing." He paused to adjust the microphone. "Gentlemen," he wheezed, "can you all hear me?" His voice bounced and echoed off the deserted hangars at the far side of the field.

They were all stunned. His words rang in their ears. No one answered. "Well, very good, very good." He cleared his throat. "I'm glad that you made it." His words were slurred, as if he were on medication, or very old and tired.

The Admiral continued to speak. A tremor of pride entered his voice as he praised their accomplishments and explained their mission. "You young people are our hope for the future. You are the best this society has to offer. You are making a great sacrifice. I praise you, I salute you, and in many ways, I am envious of you." His voice became



"Gentlemen, can you hear me?"

loud and strong. "Your individual missions will vary. Some of you will resupply our settlements at the fringes of the galaxy. Some of you will engage in battle, and some of you will be the fathers of new and better worlds.

"All of you"—he paused to clear his throat and lower his voice—"every last man of you, will travel forward in time, never returning to this special place in the universe."

"We are all time travellers." His voice was calm, patient, and filled with concern. "Most of us wander through time as I have done, in the company of our fellow beings. This afternoon you will leave us to awaken hundreds of years in the future . . . our future."

The little Admiral walked towards the line of cadets. He paused for a moment to say something to Burly, then walked slowly up and down the ranks, shaking each man's hand. He stopped in front of Jake and smiled. His eyes seemed alive and young. "Well, young man, I've heard a lot about you." Jake's heart beat faster. "How could he know about me?" he thought. They shook hands, and before Jake had a chance

to speak, the wizened Admiral said, "God's speed son," and moved down the line.

* * * * *

Jake was lying in a foam-filled container, looking up into the faces of three hovering attendants. Their noses and mouths were covered by white surgical masks. An intense white light scorched his eyes. A strange numbness crept up his legs. His eyelids became heavy, then closed.



≡ CHAPTER 2 ≡

GAMMALON ENCOUNTER

Millions of cilia-like fibers flowed over his body. Each pass lifted more of the gelled silicone casing from his skin. A blast of high-energy ion particles bathed him in blue-white light. The small enclosure sparkled with blue flashes of energy, smelling of ozone. Gradually, semi-darkness returned. A dull humming sound filled the room. Jake rose slowly from the stainless steel slab like a dead man rising from his coffin.

His bare feet touched the cold metal deck. He flinched, just beginning to realize where he was. He stood, rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands, nodded to clear his head, and surveyed the room. "Oh, no. Not a transport!"

Jake arrived at the Situation Room in a daze, assaulted by pulsing bright lights and the repetitive scream of a high-pitched claxon. He stepped from the cylindrical elevator hatch and entered.

A small illuminated button pulsed bright red in the center of the control console. He raced forward and slammed his hand against the panel; the lights stopped flashing and the claxon ceased its wail.

"It's about time." A pleasant baritone voice startled him. "I've been waiting for almost thirty minutes. You know, we've got an emergency on our hands. Sit down, Jake. We'll talk it over."

Ensign Jake Stinger collapsed into one of the two contoured chairs facing the console. "O.K. what gives? What model are you anyhow?"

"I'm CLIDE," the voice answered. "That's short for Computer Linguistic Information and Data Embryo. The embryonic part means that I'm a bit underdeveloped. However, I've been programmed to learn. As I work with you, I'm sure to pick up all sorts of nifty data."

Jake was disgusted. "Are you telling me that you're a MOD-I?"

"Correct, Jake. A MOD-I it is. One of the best units ever developed by R&D."

"Listen, CLIDE," Jake said. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, if you were programmed to have any, but the MOD-I was outmoded before I was born." He shook his head disgustedly. "Star Fleet discontinued their use more than two decades ago. How did I ever get stuck with you?"

"It could have been that time you caught Plasma-Ray Instructor Squiggly sneaking onto the base with that Fem-Android, Nurse Elems!" CLIDE suggested innocently.

"How did you know about that?"

"It's all in my data banks. I've got a complete dossier on you that goes back to your birth. It's always good to know who you're working with."

Jake tapped his fingers against the panel. "O.K., what class vessel is this, and what's our situation?"

"No problem," CLIDE began. "You, and your assistant, 7EN4, who is currently being revived, are aboard Eggtube Transport 2DELTA76. Your mission was to have been the safe transport and off-loading of supplies on Nystrum IV. However, as you may have surmised, we seem to have encountered a little problem." CLIDE paused, as if afraid to continue.

"Go ahead, CLIDE. I'm all ears."

"Well, my long-range scan has picked up something unusual in quadrant A23, now exactly twenty-seven earth minutes distant. The signals are faint, but it's beginning to look like Gammalon pirates."

"So, you're not sure yet." His face turned red. "If you're not sure there's a danger, why did you wake me up? Why didn't you just take evasive action?"

"Jake, Jake, Jake." CLIDE sounded as if he were lecturing a truant schoolboy. "Article 712,99 specifically states that a human will be present in the Situation Room in the event of any potential danger. Jake, it's just the way I'm programmed. How can I help it? It's just the way I am."

"O.K., O.K. Give me the armament list and status."

This was a command that CLIDE was well prepared for. He proudly listed the freighter's readiness status. "Two 2000 series photon rays forward, two 1000 series photon rays aft, and a MOD SLP/65 evasive electronic countermeasures set. In addition to these armaments, the Eggtube Transport is capable of sublight hyperwarp. All equipment in green status."

"Is that all? I just pray that we're not really going to have to face Gammalons. CLIDE, this is my first mission. I don't want it to be my last."

* * * * *

Brazt was crunched into a tight ball, squeezed behind a jumble of steaming pipes and wires. His flesh moved, tightened, then convulsed. The contractions were more regular, sharper, excruciatingly painful.

His breathing became faster. His twin hearts pounded a syncopated rhythm, pushing green life-liquid in powerful surges through his contorted body. The final moult was always the most painful, the most dangerous. Brazt's thin body shuddered.

He was barely conscious. He fought to retain his senses. If Clazon found him defenseless, he was dead. And he was so close—so close to total control and absolute power.

He hissed the name Clazon. Hate would keep him awake. The ugly, misshapen image of Clazon twisted and turned in his fevered brain. He looked contemptuously at Clazon's form from all angles. Gaunt, thin arms and legs covered by translucent blue-tinged flesh, a soft stomach, and cruel grey multicelled eyes. Then his mind's eye focused on Clazon's power. Four slim appendages at the end of his thin wrists. The smooth fingers were broad at their tips and, if Clazon's victim were lucky, white beams of vaporizing instant death spewed from their ends. If Clazon was in an ugly mood, and that was often, the poor underling would squirm and scream at Clazon's feet, engulfed in searing, burning pain.

Brazt shuddered, remembering his experience under the beams. Soon, when Brazt's moult was finished—if they didn't find him—Clazon would feel the pain of Brazt's fingers. "They will all cringe beneath the sting of my power." His thoughts were interrupted by a wailing alarm. "We've encountered an alien vessel. I'll be missed on the bridge." He willed the moulting to go faster.

* * * * *

"Don't worry." Jake spun around. "With me on board, we'll make it through unscathed." The voice sounded as confident, in a high, youthful, idealistic way, as his old Nursery Group teacher organizing games.

The girl stood straight, as if on parade, hair and uniform unblemished and unwrinkled. She was tall, almost as tall as he, and for some reason his heart sunk to his boots.

"Who, or rather what, are you?"

"Name's Lisa Rome." She walked up to Jake, formally saluted, and sat down stiffly next to him.

"Well, Lisa Rome, welcome abroad. I just hope you know your stuff. CLIDE's been telling me we're in for a little trouble." Jake kept it formal; he felt that this might be a tedious relationship. And as if to prove him

right, she replied smugly, "Don't worry, Ensign, I know my stuff. I graduated head of my class."

"CLIDE." Jake purposely turned away from the girl. "Have you made positive contact yet?"

"No, Jake. I should have positive I.D. within ten minutes. Current data reinforces my initial report. Gammalon pirates."

"O.K., CLIDE, just let me know the minute you have the situation firmed up." Jake turned to Lisa, briefed her, then inquired, "You said you graduated head of your class. What's your specialty?"

"Nice of you to ask, Ensign."

"This is going to be a long voyage . . . I hope. Try Jake, O.K.?"

"Sure, Jake, anything you say . . . up to a point. Electronic Warfare and Countermeasures is my strong suit, but I studied gunnery as well as medicine, with some omni-biology courses."

"I hope we won't need your medical skills in the near future, but if these are Gammalons, I'll be counting on your E.W. expertise. I understand their electronics are fairly sophisticated."

"You understand correctly," she said. "Their radar, if you can really call it that, operates in the violet spectrum of the light band. They'll use deceptive jamming as well as pulse-node frequency-agility tactics. Very difficult to counter. What type of equipment is this scow fitted with?"

"CLIDE tells me our great ship has a MOD SLP/65 set onboard. What's your assessment?"

"It's not going to be easy. But it's not impossible." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'll do my best."

"Right. You'd better get acquainted with the equipment while I check system readiness, then I'll try to peek a look at our adversaries on long-range scan."

* * * * *

"Ahggh . . . the pain." It spread from Brazt's hooved toes, up his calves, and sliced into his midsection like an upward-thrusting dagger. He doubled over. His skin turned a darker blue as air whooshed out of his collapsing lung. "Got to hold on," he gasped. He felt thousands of needles puncturing his stretched skin. He heard a tearing sound as the raw skin at the front of his feet split open. The dry outer skin layer fell back in a straight line that raced up the front of his legs. He held back a scream as the two openings met at his groin and continued racing, as one large fissure, up his stomach and the center of his chest. His body jerked involuntarily straight.

He felt as if he were being played alive. The pain reached his hands.

They began to shake. Smoke poured from his fingertips as the outer layer of skin began to dissolve. He looked in amazement as his hands began to change in shape from thinly pointed appendages to fat, mushroom-tipped weapons.

Clazon's voice screamed at him from a wall-mounted loudspeaker. "Brazt!" Clazon spat out his name, making it sound foul and repugnant. "Brazt. You will pay! We have found a fat, juicy earth ship. You will live to watch our carnage. Then, Brazt, we will make a carnage of you! Desertion in the face of the enemy, Brazt. I am going to enjoy watching you suffer!"

* * * * *

Jake punched a series of numbers into the comand console, and the view-screen listed the battle hardware. A green light pulsed next to each red line of text, indicating all systems GO and in full battle readiness. He punched another button, and the screen showed a long-range view of their sector and a blurred view of quadrant A23 at the top of the screen.

"CLIDE. Let's see a read-out of distance to target displayed on the right-hand corner of the screen."

Tension mounted as they approached the encounter, affecting even CLIDE's long-winded programming. Without answering, CLIDE went into action. A string of numbers flowed across the screen.

"Well done, CLIDE. Now I'd like you to put up our shields, start with low energy, and if we make positive contact, pull them up to full strength."

"Sorry, Jake, but this craft is not equipped with shields."

"Oh, brother. Did you hear that Lisa? No shields! We won't stand a chance."

She thought for a moment. "Maybe we can outrun them."

"Right." Jake turned his attention to the computer, impressed but irritated.

"CLIDE, do you have positive contact yet? We're running out of time. We'll be reaching point of no return in less than a minute."

"Sorry, sir." The computer's use of "sir" worried Jake. "But," CLIDE continued, "even though all the indicators point to Gammalon pirates, I won't have positive I.D. for another five minutes."

"But by then it will be too late!" Jake exploded. "If they are Gammalons, we'll be forced to fight."

"Sorry, sir." CLIDE replied.

* * * * *

Brazt felt a shudder flow through the Dreadnaught as battle drive was engaged. The pain was easing. He sat up and looked down at himself. Dead skin flaked away from his body as he rose, exposing a smooth, radiant, translucent blue-sheened covering. He flexed his cup-tipped fingers and latent energy snapped and buzzed, tugging to be released from each appendage.

Brazt held his left arm forward, pointed the four fingers of his hand towards the double-thick hatch. He willed the energy to leap. Four beams of solar intense light leaped from his fingertips and sliced through the thick metal like a hot knife through butter. Smoke hissed from four perfectly round holes in the hatch's center.

Brazt leaned back and savored his power. "Soon, this armada will be mine and Clazon will entertain me! Entertain his Lord in a method befitting my rank and status. Today ends his reign of insolence. Today marks the ascent of Brazton, the first Lord of Gammala!"

* * * * *

Lisa and Jake both stared at the upper portion of the view-screen, waiting for the blur to change into recognizable shape. Jake tapped a pencil nervously on the instrument panel. Lisa waited in readiness, her fingers poised before the knobs and switches of the E.W. console.

CLIDE broke the silence excitedly. "Positive I.D. Gammalons! Three of them. Two Regnaught Fighters and one Dreadnaught. Relative bearing 360 degrees, range 500 kilometers and closing. Intercept at point ALPHA97 at 2145 hours."

"Show it, CLIDE! Put it up on the screen!" Jake was frantic.

The screen blinked, then showed a representation of three Gammalon vessels. Superimposed red lines moved slowly towards a point in the center to indicate calculated point of contact.

Suddenly, the Gammalon vessels vanished, and the three red lines swept aimlessly across the empty screen.

Lisa's fingers scurried across her instrument panel. "Deceptive jamming, Jake. I'm going to counter."

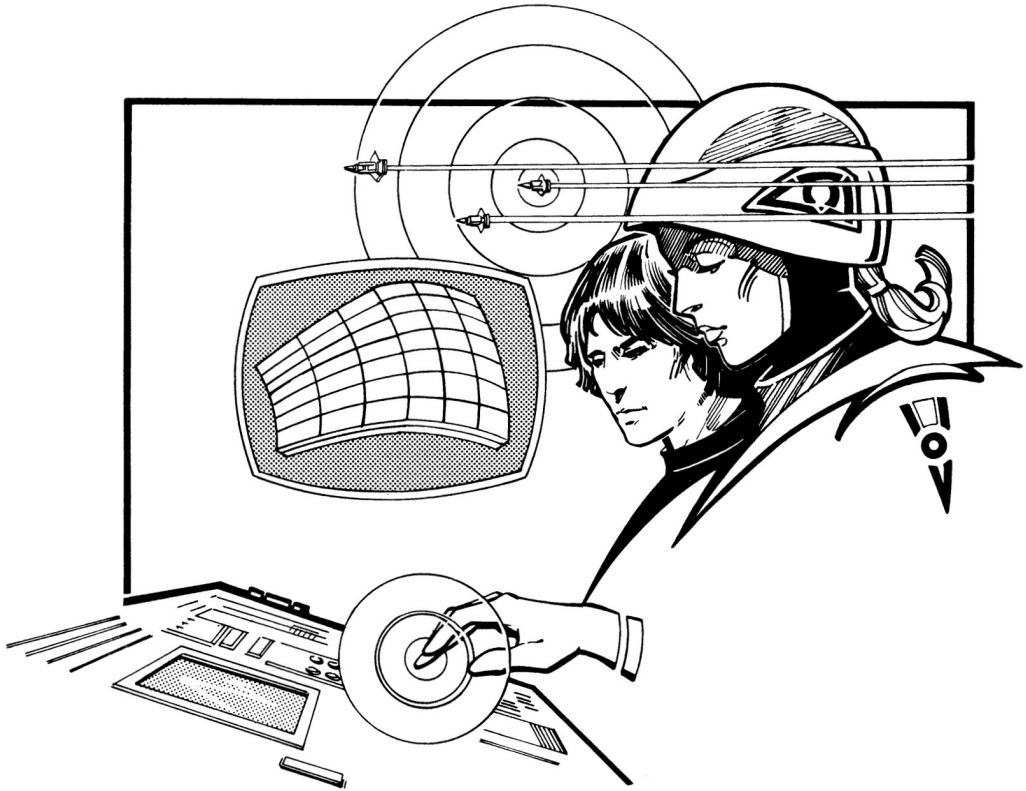
Jake gulped. To regain control of the situation, and himself, he said, "CLIDE, based on your last fix, when can we expect contact?"

"Still looks like 2145, sir. That will be in precisely 5.72 minutes."

"Did you hear that Lisa? If we can't see them, we can't fight them. We'll be dead in the water!"

She didn't answer. Her entire being was focused on the small screen and the buttons of her E.W. console.

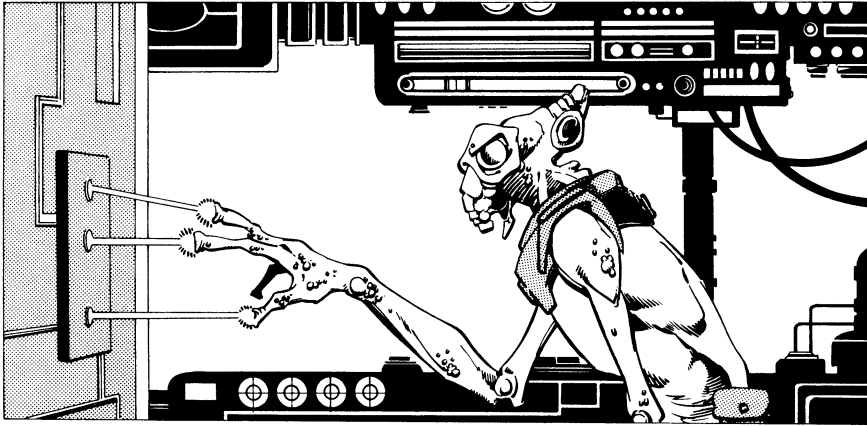
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Lisa's fingers scurried across the instrument panel, her entire being focused on the small screen.

Brazton, the "-on" proudly added to his name to indicate a Lord of the Third Moul, rolled from his hiding place behind the jumble of wires and pipes. He stood on the grated walkway and leaned his conical head against the hatchway to listen. The passageway beyond was still. "They must be in the control room." He opened the door and stealthily walked into the purple-lit passage. He felt vibrantly alive, and fought to hold himself back as he slinked slowly towards the control room hatch.

He froze as the passageway lights dimmed, then regained their brilliance. He caught his breath and calmed his racing hearts. The cloaking shields had been activated, making the ship invisible to their prey. Now was his time to strike. Commander Clazon was busy maneuvering the Dreadnaught and its two robot fighter escorts in for the kill.



He stopped before a sliding door and pointed the four fingers of his right hand at a large blue circle recessed into the wall at the door's side. It was a simple matter of willing the energy to flow. Three bolts of light jumped from his fingertips and slammed into the blue circle. The circle glowed red and the door whisked open, revealing Commander Clazon's broad back hunched over a control console, flanked on either side by his two lieutenants. Clazon twirled around. His large grey eyes seemed to shine, his white broad teeth gaped out of his opened mouth. Then, a flash of white light, and Clazon's head was a smouldering grey pulp. His body jerked erect, then toppled from the chair, falling in a heap to the floor.

Brazton swept his smoking fingertips in an arc in front of him as he stepped majestically into the control room. The two lieutenants looked in horror at their fallen leader, then slowly lowered themselves to the ground, on both knees, before their new commander.

"Get off your knees, you sniveling drivels. Obey me now!" The two lieutenants bolted up and stood at attention. "You will pay for your obeisance to that worm." He pointed at Clazon's decapitated body. "And you, Sleft." He pointed at the shorter of the two. "You will learn in a most interesting and entertaining way. But now that we are engaging an enemy, your punishment will have to wait."

Brazton walked to the control chair, kicking the body in its stomach before sitting down at the console. The two lieutenants took their places at his side, awaiting his first order. He examined the readings on the small panel, then leaned back and looked at the image on the screen. "Earthlings," he hissed. "Our sensors indicate medical supplies, grain, and two life forms. Interesting booty," he said to himself. He turned to the taller officer. "Kran, fire to maim, not to kill. I want those supplies

and I want those Earthlings. It's been over a year since I've enjoyed the sweet taste of flesh." Blue spittle dribbled down his chin.

* * * * *

A sudden blast flung Lisa to the deck. She struggled back to her station, her helmet knocked to one side. Undaunted, she continued to flick switches and turn dials.

Jake yanked the two engine levers forward in an attempt to outdistance the Gammalons, then watched nervously as the coolant gauge approached red.

"That hit was just for openers. Find them, Lisa, and find them fast. Next time, we may not be so lucky." He spoke to CLIDE. "You'd better start thinking, and thinking fast."

The damage claxon sounded. "Turn that damn thing off, CLIDE. I can't concentrate!"

"Damage report, sir."

"Not now, CLIDE." He turned to Lisa. "Can you crack their code? How long will it take? Where the hell are they?" The questions poured out in a jumble. "Lisa?" he pleaded.

"Almost, Jake. I've almost got it. Just a few more . . ." Another blast shook the ship.

"This baby's cranked up to max and they're still scoring hits. We can't lose them!" Jake turned his attention to the armament buttons. The photon rays fired randomly, sending spurts of blue energy outwards into the apparently empty space around the ship.

"I just hope we get lucky . . . and fast! Random firing just won't hack it."

"I got it!" She shouted. "They should be coming up now."

Three representations of enemy ships, color-coded to indicate type of craft, appeared suddenly on the screen. Two blue circles and one red triangle skittered across the screen. A lightning bolt of blue smashed into one of the jittering circles, and the screen flashed brilliant white.

"We got one of their fighters!" Jake shouted. "They're pirates, but I expect them to forget our cargo and come in for the kill."

"Lisa, see if you can provide us with a cloak. One hit by that Dreadnaught and we've had it." He pointed towards the red triangle that grew menacingly as it approached. "We've got to buy some time."

"Yes, sir." She bent her head over the gauges and dials, looking like an alchemist mixing brew, and poured the whole of her concentration into the effort.

* * * * *

"You fools!" Brazton turned from the screen. "They've destroyed one of our robot ships, and now they've disappeared!" He stood up and pointed his deadly fingers at the two cringing lieutenants. "Annihilate them! Annihilate the nonbelievers. They shall not be allowed to defile our galaxy!"

* * * * *

"Look at that!" Jake shouted. "They're firing wildly." The enemy's particle rays swayed back and forth like confused searchlights. "They're firing at our last position. Evasive action, CLIDE. Quick, before they get a fix."

"But of course, sir." The ship lunged suddenly to port.

Much to Jake's irritation, CLIDE continued in a well-modulated, scholarly tone. "I've been doing some research while you were otherwise occupied."

"And?" Jake asked impatiently.

"And, sir"—CLIDE sounded more and more like an English schoolmaster—"the closest parallel that can be made to our current predicament occurred on Earth during a conflict referred to as the Second World War. To be precise, sir, the tactics that I am about to recommend were proven somewhat effective in the North Atlantic Ocean."

"What do you mean, 'somewhat effective'? CLIDE, get to the point, and get to it fast!"

"Very well, sir, allow me to explain. The parallel is that of the submarine, an underwater vessel, and the destroyers, surface vessels bent on annihilating the submarine lurking hidden below. You see, sir, the destroyers could not accurately locate their prey. Their offense consisted of systematically blanketing an area of ocean with explosive charges where they *thought* the submarine was lurking."

Jake looked puzzled. "I don't get it, CLIDE."

"As you can see, sir, now that Lisa has our cloaking up, we are effectively invisible to the Gammalons. They become the destroyers, while we take the part of the submarine."

"And?"

"And, sir, we play the same trick on the Gammalons that many submarine commanders played on the destroyers . . . We play dead."

"Dead's exactly what we're going to be if you don't move on!"

"The submarine," CLIDE calmly continued, "released bilge oil and debris from its torpedo tubes. This floated to the surface, giving the impression to the destroyer's commander that the submarine had been destroyed. I feel, sir, with all respect, that we may be able to execute a similar ruse."

"You may have something, CLIDE; but timing is going to be critical."

Jake made some quick calculations and explained his tactics. They took their stations and waited for the right moment.

The Dreadnaught pulled closer, firing its death beam in a scanning pattern from left to right. "Steady," Jake said, "steady. The next one is it."

A blue streak of energy raced towards the port side of the transport. Jake shouted, "Now!"

CLIDE swung the ship hard to starboard. Lisa released a blinding explosive flare in front of the ship, and Jake pushed a console button. Med Compartment 17B opened, spewing thousands of cartons into space.

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A blinding white flash covered the screen. Brazton shielded his eyes. "We've got them!" he shouted. He stood up and leaned closer to the screen. Thousands of cartons were racing towards his ship. "Starboard, and fast!" The two Gammalon warships altered course abruptly, swerving to avoid the onrush of debris. They paused for a brief moment, then returned to scoop up the precious medical supplies.

Brazton turned towards Sleft and slowly lifted his left hand. A bolt of energy leaped from his fingertips, slamming into the Gammalon's square chest. Sleft screamed as he fell to the deck, kicking his hooved feet in agony. "You snourt, you won't die. That would be too easy. You have just begun to suffer. When we return to Gammala, your punishment will begin in earnest. We have captured precious cargo, but we have lost a robot ship. You will pay." Brazton flexed his still smouldering fingers and laughed.

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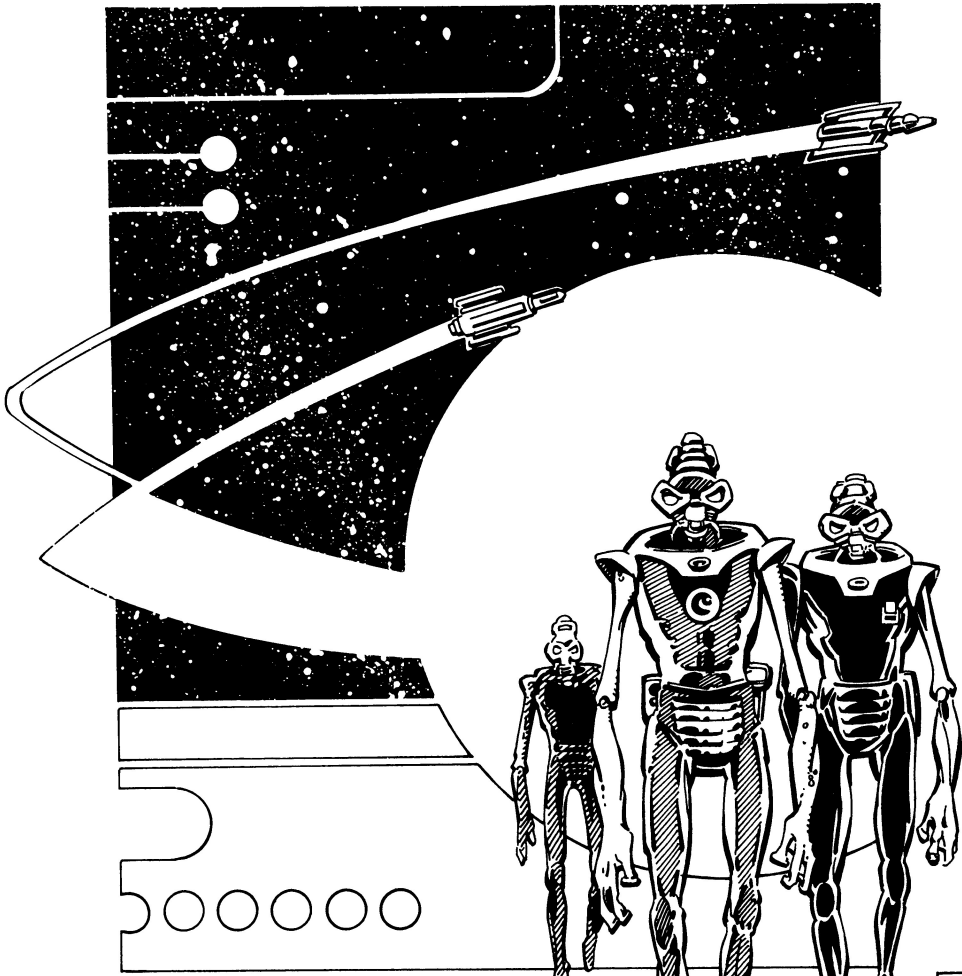
Hidden behind the flare and jumble of debris, the Eggtube transport maneuvered behind a nearby Class II star.

The Dreadnaught and fighter swept through the area, then, with holds full, and apparently satisfied with the kill, the two warships turned in tight formation and raced back to port.

"Well, it looks like we've lost them for good this time." Jake was drenched in sweat. "Lisa, that was perfect timing! If you'd missed by as little as two nanoseconds, the Gammalons would've had us for supper."

Lisa leaned way back in her contoured chair, propped her feet on the control panel, and clasped her hands behind her head. Outwardly, she exuded calm and confidence. Inside, she was totally drained. "No problem, Jake," she said nonchalantly. "Told you I was top in my class."

"Great. Just cloning great." Jake spat out the words. "That's just



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great. Big deal. So she's top of her class. What the smog does that mean, anyway? CLIDE, old buddy, I guess it's just you and me. Women. I just can't figure them out!"

"Neither can I," CLIDE piped in, "and I've done extensive historical research and data analysis."

Lisa trooped off indignantly to her room.

* * * * *

They waited hidden behind the small sun for three days, Jake not talking to Lisa, Lisa spending most of the time in her room. And, if it weren't for CLIDE, the two might never have spoken again. Jake and Lisa might very well have spent the rest of their lives behind the small sun.

Jake was taking the daily readings on the bridge when CLIDE said, "Nu?" Jake turned around, startled, and asked, "What?"

"Nu," replied CLIDE, "I said, 'nu'."

"What do you mean, 'new'? Isn't that a command from ancient BASIC? I knew you were old, CLIDE, but not *that* old! Anyway, can't you see I'm busy? New. Humph. New to you!"

"I've been studying," said CLIDE, "an ancient Earth language called Yiddish. And in Yiddish, 'nu' means 'so.'"

"I don't get it, CLIDE. What's your point?"

"So, when are you two going to talk to one another? 'So,' when are you going to go someplace and get this ship repaired? . . . Nu?"

"When you're right, you're right, CLIDE. We do have to move on. But how can you expect me to work with that . . . that woman?"

"What are the options, Jake?" CLIDE asked.

* * * * *

There were no options. Jake and Lisa had to work together. And they did. But no one said they had to like it. And they didn't.

They worked like two machines, performing their manual navigation tasks without talking, and when they did talk, they said things like, "Check coordinate 23,49 in the T-5 sector of Galaxy 2DX.65."

Pretty mundane stuff. In fact, all they talked about was shop. But, after two grueling weeks, they had accomplished a minor miracle.

"Lisa, Lisa!" Jake yelled excitedly. "Take a look at this." Lisa rushed over and they both stared wide-eyed at the greenish-orange globe that grew in size on the view screen. "That's got to be Weomby. I know it! CLIDE. Run a planet-scan and dump it on the screen."

Within seconds, the screen filled with numbers, each one confirming their arrival in orbit.

“This is great, just great! We made it. And don’t give me any of your ‘top of the class’ routine. We made it together!”

* * * * *

“CLIDE, before we land, give me the rundown on this planet.”
The screen filled with facts:

Circumference:	40,237 Kilometers
One Day Cycle:	24.8 Earth Hrs.
Sun:	Class 5 Fusion
Atmosphere:	*Oxygen/carbon Earth compatible
Water:	Yes
Inhabitable:	*Yes
Last Explored:	Unknown

**Indicates data based on interpolation.*

“CLIDE, are you telling us that the latest information you have on this place could be over three hundred earth years old?”

“I’m afraid so, Jake. You’ve got to remember that we’re at the very fringe of ‘Expansionist’ territory.”

Lisa wanted to know more. “Tell me what the inhabitants are like, or . . . were.”

CLIDE searched his memory banks. The console screen flashed and flowed through rainbow colors. “Nothing. Not fully inputted for this sector.”

“Jake, before we land, we should take some precautions. CLIDE’s memory seems to be less than adequate.”

The recommendations from both Jake and CLIDE were the same: out with the sensors, collect as much information as possible, then descend as quickly as possible. Their navigation system was out. They were having minor problems with the propulsion control system. What else was broken was anybody’s guess.

“Lisa, have you made radio contact with them yet?” Jake was impatient.

“This is strange, Jake. Really weird.” She looked worried. “I’ve tried every channel in the book, and no response, just static.”

“Are you sure your radios weren’t damaged by the Gammalons?”

“Oh, come off it, Jake. What do you take me for? That was the first thing I checked.”

“Well, there are only a few other possibilities. Either they don’t

want us to know they're down there because they're scared. Or they're setting up an ambush. Or . . . they no longer exist. They've become extinct."

Lisa snapped suddenly. Her eyes shone fiercely. She dug her fingernails into the arms of her chair. "We can't stay here! We'll rot, we'll die. We've got to get this ship fixed, and we've got to get it fixed now!"

"Hold on to your tunic, Lisa. Cool it!" Jake leaned forward and ripped off a page-long sheet as it tumbled from the printer. "Looks like we're going to have to go down on manual. Our Auto-Land is on the fritz."



=== CHAPTER 3 ===

SURVIVAL

Hot wind buffeted the damaged craft as it sliced through Weomby's thick, polluted atmosphere. The Eggtube transport wobbled back and forth, like a dragonfly standing on end, as Jake struggled with the side thrusters and Lisa controlled their rate of descent.

Weomby was Earth-like. It revolved around one sun at a distance sufficient to support life. But here the similarity ended. Thick haze permanently encased the planet in a putrid, yellow sulphur-based shroud.

The pollution was layered, becoming extremely dense at the surface, thinning out above, and from the portal of the transport, Weomby glowed seductively like an orange-yellow jewel.

They descended ever closer to the surface. No radio beacon to guide them, no computer to help them. On manual, aiming for an imaginary spot on the surface of an inhospitable planet that offered a bare thread of hope. A vague promise of survival. Desperation drew them to Weomby.

Weomby was a planet of desperation. The atmosphere told part of the story. The ship's sensors and CLIDE's interactive screen warned of the hell that awaited them. Nuclear radiation . . . residue from a war long lost. The screen flashed red, the alarm sounded, but neither Jake nor Lisa had time to look up from their stations. They had passed the point of no return and struggled to bring the bulky transport down intact.

* * * * *

The creatures blended in with the tangled forest that protected them. They were one with the sinewy, mutated plant life that had

covered most of Weomby since the war. The planet, encased in a murky, thick, polluted atmosphere, provided a classic example of the "greenhouse effect." The sun's rays diffused evenly while the layer of pollutants retained the heat.

Each day was the same. At sunrise, strong hot winds blew from the northwest, dying to complete stillness and sweltering heat at midday. It never rained. The atmosphere was saturated with moisture, and everything on the planet dripped beads of hot steaming water that smelled of decomposing life. The ground was swamp-like, imbued with moisture, and pockets of gelled "quick-mud" waited to swallow up the unwary.

The two hunters were humanoid, with elongated features. Their faces were drawn, thin and skeletal. Their greenish-brown skin was the color of the ground, and their veins stood out plainly over the surface of their mottled skin. Bulging, plant-like growths festered on their thin arms and chests.

Slung between them, tied loosely to a pole with vine, hung their prey. A humanoid figure much like themselves, except for a tattooed triangular marking on its forehead. A slit throat caused its head to hang down grotesquely, swaying back and forth, dripping green liquid as they moved cautiously through the undergrowth.

Suddenly, white hot light, the intensity of a thousand phosphorous flares, flashed above them, and the air roared with a sound louder than an erupting volcano.

They stopped abruptly and the leader stumbled forward, almost dropping the load carried between them. Looking up at the descending rocket, he was filled with a fear and hatred that had no basis in his experience. The thing would crash. He judged the distance. It would destroy the encampment.

The leader shrieked. A piercing sound that was swallowed up by the rumble of the powerful engines above. He froze, unable to move his eyes from what he sensed was impending doom.

* * * * *

Lisa screamed. "Jake! My God, we're going to crash! Control it. Control it, for God's sake!"

"I'm trying. I'm trying." Jake's hands were welded to the control stick, maneuvering the bulky ship towards the ground that was racing up to meet them.

"Impact in ten and counting . . . niner, eight . . ." CLIDE voiced the obvious. "Seven . . . six . . ."

"This is . . ." Jake didn't have time to finish. It happened fast. In the last four seconds of their descent, the rocket tore through the upper cover of trees and smashed uncontrolled into the muck of Weomby.

The two hunters were instantly vaporized. Their camp disappeared. Around it, the foilage burned in a bright orange ring that extended a hundred yards on all sides of the impact.

The ship wailed and groaned. Every bolt and weld strained to the limit as the ship literally fought to stay in one piece. The emergency computer took over and shut down the engines.

The bulky tube leaned precariously to one side, balanced suspended for a few seconds, then crashed down loudly, finally coming to rest at a forty-five degree angle against an enormous tree.

Havoc and almost complete destruction reigned inside. Oxygen screamed out of cracks in the ship's skin. Bulkhead doors automatically slammed shut. A siren wailed. Red lights flashed. The once orderly control room was strewn with debris. CLIDE yelled, "Impact! Impact! Impact!"

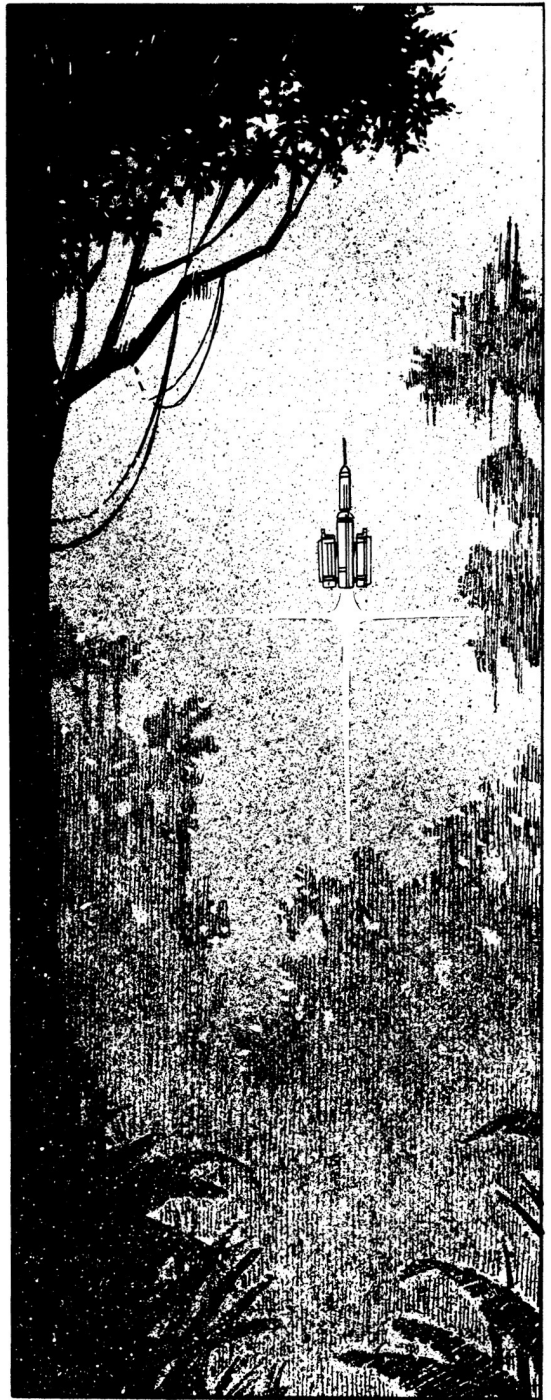
Jake was buckled into his chair. His upper body, arms, and head were part of the control panel and a trickle of blood seeped from his head, dripping to the deck.

Lisa's neck had snapped forward and her body slouched limply like a broken marionette. Her long hair hung in front of her face. Her arms dangled lifelessly at her sides.

CLIDE's screaming stopped abruptly and the control room became eerily quiet.

* * *

"Lisa. Lisa, wake up." The voice was soft and soothing. "Lisa. Mustn't be late for school. You know how long it takes you to get ready. I'll start your breakfast and by the time I get back, I expect you to be dressed." The voice became more insistent. "Lisa. I don't have



all day.” The door slammed. She winced, drew herself into a tight, secure ball, and huddled deep within the warmth of the comforter.

“I don’t want to go to school” she thought, “not today. I’ve got a headache. I don’t feel good, my stomach hurts and they won’t miss me anyway.” She turned over, faced the wall, and pulled the covers over her head.

“Lisa! Lisa!” The voice had become metallic, flat and demanding.

Sharp pain flooded the back of her neck. Acrid bile welled in her throat as she fought to crawl deeper into the warmth and security of her comforter.

“Lisa, wake up! Lisa, wake up! This is CLIDE.”

She started. “CLIDE? Who’s CLIDE?” she thought. Then, in an instant, she realized. “CLIDE is a computer and I’ve survived. I’m alive!”

“Are you all right, Lisa?” CLIDE’s machine voice somehow conveyed a touch of compassion and empathy.

She forced her eyes open, thankful that the lighting was subdued combat red. “I’ll be all right.” She rolled her head from side to side. “I think.”

The room was slanted, pulling her down to the left. She held onto the right side of the chair and forced the seat buckle open with her free hand. She desperately grasped the console and crawled painfully upwards towards Jake. She stopped a few feet from her goal, gasping for breath. Tears of pain streamed down her face. She inched forward the last few feet, pulled herself up slowly, and stood dazed in front of him. “Jake.” Her voice betrayed her anguish. “Jake, please,” she pleaded, “please don’t be dead.”

She moved to the rear of his chair, held onto it, and tugged at the back of his shirt, pulling him from the console. His body fell backwards to the left and collapsed over the arm of the chair.

With trembling fingers, she gently lifted his head back and felt an almost physical stomach-punch as she looked at his battered face.

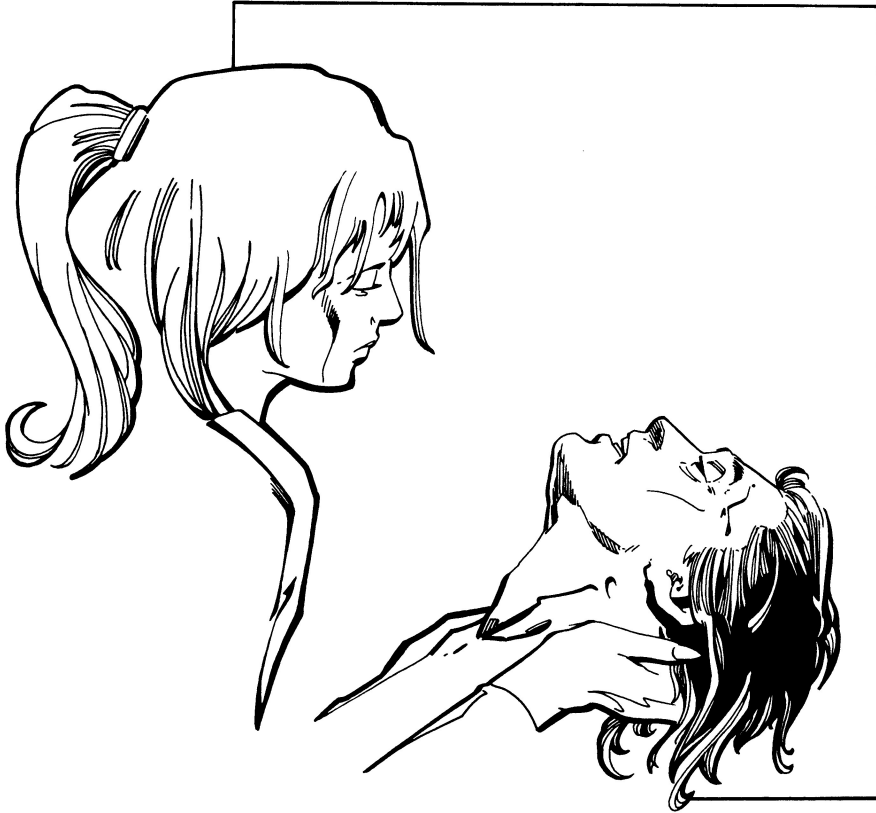
She shuddered, but forced herself to remain calm. She put her fingers to his throat and felt a faint pulse.

She reacted. The arduous hours spent in medical training took control of her actions. She moved to the console and entered a series of commands. The portal, normally used to dispatch food, opened and a stainless steel tray of medical supplies slid out.

“CLIDE, I’m going to need some help. Increase the oxygen mix in this compartment by”—she paused to calculate—“about twenty percent.”

“That may be dangerous,” he warned. “There’s a high probability of explosion. Some of the circuits are still smoldering.”

Her patience was gone. “We’ve got to revive him, and I don’t give a damn if this rust bucket goes up in the attempt! That was an order, CLIDE. Do it!”



Oxygen whistled from the main vents and a cold, refreshing wave of air swept over her.

Time was precious. She loosened the collar of his shirt, then gently swabbed the caked blood from his face. After his face was cleaned, she saw that it wasn't as bad as she first thought. She carefully examined a thin gash on his forehead and applied medi-glue and a butterfly bandage, suturing the wound closed.

He was breathing regularly, and when Lisa rechecked, she was relieved to find his pulse stronger. The added oxygen was doing the job.

There was nothing more she could do but wait. She sat on the floor, knees up, and leaned against the side of his chair. She slowly fell forward into a deep sleep.

* * * * *

Something was crawling in her hair! She woke with a start and spun around, ready to fend off an imaginary insect. It was Jake's hand.

She pulled herself up. "Jake, Jake. Are you all right?" He didn't seem to hear her. His head rolled from side to side, then his eyelids began to flicker open.

"It's not flair," he slurred, "not flair at all." He opened his eyes and looked at her with a blank expression. "What happened?"

All the tension of the past hours left her, and she began to cry. "Jake, you don't know how worried I was. I thought you were going to die."

"Not a chance. Me, die? Not Jake Stinger, hero of the universe," he mocked. "That's absurd!" He smiled bravely. "How's CLIDE?"

"You ingrate! I should have let you die. 'How's CLIDE?' What about me?" She stepped back and Jake's smile became broader. He began to laugh. She breathed a sigh of relief and they both laughed together like a couple of school kids.

"What's so funny?" CLIDE asked. And that caused the two to laugh even harder.

"O.K., we made it." Lisa caught her breath. "But what do we do now?"

"The first thing I'm going to do," Jake replied, "is take two aspirins and catch some shut-eye. I've got a splitting headache." He was still smiling as he fell back in his chair, snoring.

* * * * *

Jake awoke to a depressing reality. Although they were both virtually unharmed, the ship had suffered severe damage. CLIDE reported that the transport's cellular skin had ripped open on the port side, exposing precious seed grain to Weomby's corrosive atmosphere.

The ship's regenerative mending process was agonizingly slow, like a wound healing. First, magnesium crystals were grown in chambers heated by the central reactor. The crystals were then sliced into thin platletes, transported to the breach and immersed in a pulsating silicon gel that filled the gap between the ship's multilayered skin. The gel, normally serving as insulator, was now an emergency repair medium.

At impact, the branches of an enormous tree had ripped a gaping hole in the ship's side. The silicon gel had surged to the fissure, congealing to form a temporary seal. Now magnesium platelets were slowly bonding in behind, forming a seal that would withstand the rigors of space.

Jake had braced both chairs level and they sat before a console that slanted downwards to their left. "How long before she mends, CLIDE?"

"Precisely 28.34 hours." Jake's head throbbed at CLIDE's booming response. He put his hand to his forehead and forged on. "Just report to the screen, CLIDE. I can't take the noise."

The screen filled with data, and they both tilted their heads. "It doesn't look good. The chopper's been damaged and"—Lisa leaned

closer to the screen—"the conditions outside are worse than our damage. Look at that!" She pointed her finger to a line that read, 'HEAVY CONCENTRATES OF SULFUR DIOXIDE (.001%) RESIDUAL NUCLEAR RADIATION TEMPERATURE 36C ATMOSPHERIC MOISTURE CONTENT 98.7%'

"We won't last long out there."

"We've got to, now that the surveillance copter is out of commission." He turned his attention to CLIDE, then continued. "Is there any possibility of a range scan, CLIDE? I've got to see how far from civilization we've landed. And Lisa, you check on all radio bands again. See if you can contact the locals."

CLIDE scanned the immediate vicinity of the ship while Lisa sequentially ran through all the established frequencies and codes. Jake waited impatiently, his right leg jerked up and down nervously.

Twenty minutes crawled by with no reported progress. Jake couldn't hold himself back. "CLIDE, what's the problem? You should have spotted something by now!"

"Negative, sir."

"And why not, may I ask?" Jake asked sarcastically.

"The angle of the ship, sir. Our signal is being absorbed into the ground."

"Have you tried 'rotating' the phased array?"

"Yes, sir."

Jake was exasperated. "Lisa. Any luck at your end?"

"Negative, Jake. Just static and white noise."

"There's got to be a solution. CLIDE, you've got a brain. Use it!"

But it was Lisa who came up with the answer.

"Jake, maybe we can try a 'scatter.'" Lisa explained that if they could locate a spot on the ground with reflective properties, they might be able to bounce the scan's signal off it. The signal would then, theoretically, bounce upwards to be scattered down off the layered atmosphere, arriving a distance from the ship. This, she said, might allow them to view the irradiated area.

"Well, it's worth a try," Jake mused. "CLIDE, use your magnetic sensory equipment and scan the near soil. If you find a high concentration of metal, lock in and beam the scan down."

The screen flashed a jumbled image of distorted lines, filled with static, and then the image returned. "Lock it in, CLIDE. I think you've got something." The waving vertical lines formed the shape of a contoured skyline. "How far?" Jake anxiously leaned forward. The screen blinked '10 KM.' "We've got it made. Ten kilometers. This is just beautiful." Jake shook his fists and yelled, "All right! All our problems are solved!"

"I wouldn't jump to any conclusions." Lisa warned. "We don't know what the surface conditions are, and more importantly, we still don't know if there are any Weombians out there to help us."

CLIDE reported that the surveillance copter wouldn't be repaired for another ten hours, at best.

"Well," Jake said, "now there's only one way to find out."

CLIDE provided a supply list that included lightweight filtration cups that fitted over nose and mouth, dehydrated food pellets, handheld parital beam weapons, and most importantly, two communicators. The communicators were an extension of CLIDE: mini-terminals the size of a deck of cards, that fitted comfortably into their shirt pockets.

Jake and Lisa suited up and waited apprehensively in the air lock, checking their equipment. "Ready?" Jake asked. Lisa nodded and pulled the filter cup down over her face. "This is it." He pushed the decompress button next to the irised door. A soft hum filled the small enclosure and the door's petals folded back like a camera's shutter. A stream of yellow fog rushed into the room and Lisa instinctively grabbed Jake's hand, squeezing it tightly. Their eyes met and Jake took his first filtered breath of Weomby. The membranes of his nose burned, sharp pain assaulted his lungs, and his eyes teared. He looked down.

The green-brown muck below looked treacherous. Visibility extended only a few yards. Anything could be lurking unseen in the dim light. "I don't like it, Lisa. This place gives me the creeps. Use the pocket scan and see how the footing is."

Lisa took the small terminal from her pocket. Her hand shook nervously as she aimed it towards the ground. She waved it back and forth, describing an arc, and the mini-screen drew a pattern of surface conditions. "This is strange, Jake. The mini says we've landed on what seems to be a road covered by a thin layer of mud. In most places, the ground on either side is semi-liquid to a depth of more than twenty meters."

"Well, let's get it over with. I don't think I can take this place for too long."

They tentatively lowered their feet into the muck, stood for a few seconds, then moved ahead, clutching their weapons like talismans. Lisa led the way, scanning the road with her free hand. Jake followed a few feet behind, his weapon set to kill.

The heat and acrid air sapped their strength. Perspiration streamed down Jake's angular face, and damp rings blossomed on the sides and backs of their shirts. Their progress was agonizingly slow; Jake felt more than knew that they were being watched. He spun around every few feet, straining to locate his vaguely sensed pursuers, each time both disappointed and relieved at spotting nothing.

Each step through the thin layer of mud was painful. Their ankles felt wrapped in lead and the only sound they heard was the monotonous slosh, slosh of their own clumsy movements.

It happened suddenly at dusk. The haze turned from yellow to a wispy, deep violet and the attack began.

A modulated screech, warbling like the call of an enraged baboon,



They tentatively lowered their feet into the muck, stood for a few seconds, then moved ahead, clutching their weapons like talismans.

then the splat, splat sound of something hitting the ground near their feet. Jake flung himself at Lisa, driving her to the mud. He rolled over and put his face close to her ear. "We've got to stay low. It may be our only chance." He tapped her shoulder, motioned her to follow, then slithered into a clump of stringy leaves at the road's edge. Lisa pulled up next to him and they crawled deeper into the alien swamp.

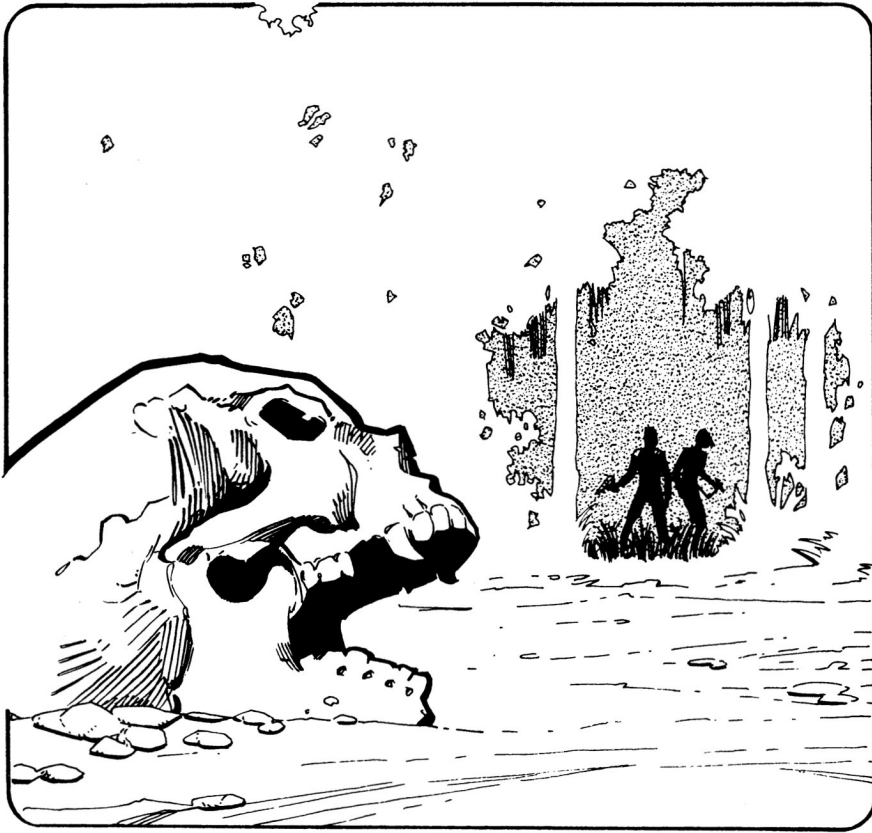
"Jake, I'm scared." She held on to his hand as they pushed slowly through the thick vegetation.

"Quiet," he hissed through clenched teeth. "If they hear us, we're dead."

He raised his hand and stopped. "This looks as good a place as any," he said. They sat in the mud, surrounded by thickets, and pointed their particle-beam weapons towards the road.

Lisa put a finger to her mouth. "Shh . . . they're close. I can hear them talking."

Dampened sounds of guttural speech filled the thick air somewhere off to the right. Suddenly, one of the creatures screeched a loud warbling call, and Lisa dug her nails into Jake's shoulder.



"This looks as good a place as any."

The creatures began to chant in time to the hollow beat of a tight-skinned drum. "Hey ugg, hey ugg, hey ugg . . ." The chanting and drum beat grew slowly fainter as the creatures faded away into the forest on the far side of the road.

Jake sighed in relief and looked into Lisa's frightened eyes. He draped his arm over her shoulder and they spent the long uncomfortable night huddled together, not talking, feeling the same loneliness and fear.

Lisa had fallen into fitful sleep, at times clutching Jake's shoulder, gripping his hand for comfort, then finally, exhausted, resting her head in his lap. It was a tense and restless night, and dawn found them still huddled together.

The haze took on a tinge of orange, and Jake whispered, "We've got to get to the city. Wake up." She moved her head tentatively, then sat up abruptly, a confused expression on her face. "The city?" Then

she remembered. "Oh, no." She rubbed her eyes. "I suppose you're right, Jake. We can't hide out forever. Who do you think they are?" She yawned and stretched. "I mean the ones who attacked us last night."

"I don't know . . . and I hope we don't find out. They may be nocturnal, sleeping in the marsh. If we stick to the road, we may have a chance." He picked up the terminal and handed it to her. "How much further?"

"Let's see." She pointed it in the general direction of the city. "It says 3.2 kilometers. We've gone further than I thought. Do you think I should check in with CLIDE before we go?"

"Sure, give it a try. See if you can find out how the repairs are going. But keep the volume down."

She pressed a small red button on the unit's side, and CLIDE responded. "CLIDE here and standing by."

"CLIDE." She put the mini close to her mouth. "We've got about three kilometers to go. At this rate, we should make it in about one hour. Before I ask how the ship's doing, enter our progress and findings in the log . . . just in case." She recapped the night's events, then asked about the ship's condition.

"Repair of structural damage is scheduled for completion at 13:50 hours today." CLIDE sounded almost human as he rattled off the status. "Reactor operational and normal, all propulsion and weapon systems check in the green. Surveillance copter will be operational at 1700 hours. Navigation computer still inop . . . presently unrepairable. Auto-land inop. The following list of components are essential to effect repairs." CLIDE listed the components, then waited for instructions.

"Nothing further now, CLIDE." She glanced at Jake. "Stay locked to this channel. We'll be checking in periodically. Out."

"Well," Jake said, "that clinches it. If we don't get to the city, we don't get off this planet. Set your weapon to 'Kill' and follow me."

They crawled noisily through the slick undergrowth towards the road. Jake, dripping green-brown mud, stopped at the edge of the road and motioned to Lisa. "What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Look over there." He pointed to the road's far side. "Do you see anything unusual?"

"No." She strained to see through the yellow haze. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe it's nothing, but I could have sworn I saw some movement in those trees." Jake shook his head, "Maybe it's the heat . . . the lack of sleep. I'm beginning to see things."

"Come on." He stood up. "Let's make tracks for the city."

It happened so fast that neither had time to react.

Three humanoid figures materialized from the forest not more than fifty feet away. Their bodies were elongated and covered with mud. Their eyes were large black ovals, almost insect-like in proportion to



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their thin, grime-streaked faces. Their mouths were thin, expressionless slits.

They held slick, green, bloated objects in each hand, twirling them menacingly as they advanced steadily toward Jake and Lisa.

"Run for it!" Jake shouted.

Lisa couldn't move—couldn't pull her eyes from the approaching creatures.

"Damn it, Lisa!" He yanked her arm. "Run. Run, for God's sake!"

They plodded clumsily through the mud, loosing ground to their pursuers.

The three attackers began to howl. Then the leader threw one of his 'weapons.' It whizzed through the air, spinning end-over-end like a slime-covered football, and landed with a splat at Jake's feet.

Jake stopped, turned, kneeled, and began firing wildly. The leader's head flew from its shoulders; its torso continued to run, then fell forward, jerking and twitching, leaking green ooze into the mud.

Another bloated thing spun through the air, landing with a sickening thud on Lisa's back. She collapsed face down into the mud. The slimy thing stuck to her back, pulsing, alive! "Jake. Help me!" She squirmed, trying to remove it. "Jake. Please. I can't stand it!"

Jake didn't hear her. His arm swung back and forth, mechanically spewing bolts of blue energy from what appeared to be the tip of his finger. Within seconds, the other two Weombians lay dismembered in the mud.

Jake shook violently, then doubled over, clutching his stomach.

He lifted his head, straightened up, and walked with an air of false calm to Lisa. His eyes were glazed, his voice hoarse. "The city. We've got to get to the city." He reached down and helped her up. She could barely stand. "Try and make it. We'll have to get that thing off when we reach the city."

Jake's every breath was painful. The filter was losing its effectiveness. He gasped for air. "You've got to make it. Just"—he coughed—"keep moving."

* * * * *

The minutes dragged like hours. They pushed ahead; Lisa weak and drained, the thing still part of her back; Jake exhausted.

They rounded a curve in the road. Ahead, in the distance, he saw a jumble of bone-white geometric structures obscured within a yellow curtain of misty haze.

They stood ankle deep in green-brown muck, alien vegetation caressing their sides. Before them, the city waited.

They walked to the edge of a large deserted plaza. Straight black lines on the asphalt pointed towards distant buildings. A hundred yards to their right, a polished black cube stood to the side of a rocket

launching pad. The remains of what appeared to be a shattered statue lay strewn at its base.

Jake pointed to the black cube. "Over there."

The mud stopped at the edge of the plaza, as if it had been neatly cut with a razor. Jake's legs almost collapsed as he took his first tentative steps on the hard surface. He felt dizzy, like a sailor returning to land. He paused to get his balance, then struggled with Lisa to the large pedestal.

He gently lowered her to the ground, then glanced towards the forest. Two humanoid figures stood at the edge of the tarp, watching.

He turned to Lisa and carefully pushed her shoulders forward. "Let's see what this thing is."

It was hand size, with banded rings of green circling a bloated, worm-shaped body. At both ends, suction-cup appendages were leeching to her back, and the green rings slowly turned dark brown as it sucked in Lisa's blood.

Jake quickly shed his backpack and pulled out an envelope. He tore it open with his teeth. "I'm going to pour iodine crystals on it."

He spread the crystals evenly over the creature. It pulsed wildly as brown, sizzling bubbles replaced its skin. It shriveled, then foamed, like a snail dowsed in salt; the two suckers fell off last, joining the bubbling mass on the ground next to Lisa.

He tore her shirt and pulled back the fabric. Two large bloodied welts stood out below her shoulder blades. He took a small vial from the pack. "This may sting." She didn't answer. He opened the vial and dabbed orange liquid on the wounds. She didn't move. He quickly applied a dressing, then, supporting her shoulder, he moved in front of her.

She was unconscious. He lowered her to the ground, rested her head on his knapsack, then gently brushed the hair back from her face.

He looked back at the forest. More creatures had arrived, standing motionless at the forest's edge. Jake spoke into his communicator, "CLIDE. Do you read?"

The little box answered, "CLIDE here."

"I'm going to put the sensor on top of this pedestal. Activate a three-sixty scan. If anything, and I mean anything, comes closer than a hundred yards, set off the alarm. I've got to get some rest."

"Jake, I have analyzed all inputs and have come to a tentative conclusion."

"O.K., CLIDE, out with it. I'm exhausted."

The box squawked back, "Those creatures appear to fear the cement. My logic tells me that they won't leave the forest."

"I don't want to hear any of your harebrained theories, CLIDE. Just stay alert!"

Jake settled to the ground next to Lisa as the unit, safely in place

above, searched for intruders. He shut his eyes and fell asleep listening to the soft hum of a distant generator, too tired to care.

* * * * *

She sat up shivering feverishly in the hot damp air, her first sensation one of searing heat below her shoulder blades. She hushed herself and rocked back and forth to ward off the pain.

It wasn't supposed to have turned out like this. She looked at the manmade sterility and emptiness around her, then back towards the forboding wall of green. She felt cheated, betrayed, and lonely. They hadn't prepared her for this.

She looked down at Jake, sleeping peacefully like a little boy on a campout. She felt an attachment to him; a certain tenderness had formed between the two. She was thankful for his help and companionship, but at the same time, she was angry. How could he sleep so contentedly while she huddled in pain?

As if to rub salt into her bruised feelings, Jake rolled over in his sleep and smacked her leg smartly with his arm. She resisted the urge to fling the arm back at him and took the abuse stoically, gritting her teeth.

A buzzing sound, like a large mosquito, shook her back to reality. She twisted her head up and searched the haze for its source. It was definitely somewhere above them, and approaching fast. As it neared, she recognized the familiar flop, flop beat of a helicopter's rotors.

"Jake, Jake!" She shook him. "Wake up. I think CLIDE's launched Surveillance One."

He sat up, reacting almost instantly.

"Jake, do you hear it?" She pointed excitedly upwards. "Now we've got a chance!"

* * * * *

Before launching S-1, CLIDE had checked the rotor blades for true-ness. If the blades were off balance by as little as ten milligrams, the delicate craft would shake itself to pieces. He then ran a series of surveillance equipment checks. He swiveled the video/infrared camera through its full range, checked the onboard transmitter and the ship's recorders. After satisfying his precise computer brain, he sent the minicopter aloft, set to home in on Jake's scanner.

The control room monitor displayed computer-enhanced images of S-1's transmissions. For a few brief moments, thick jungle raced across the screen, then the camera picked up its target . . . a shiny black cube, sitting in the middle of an airport-sized area of flat white concrete. Black painted lines sped off towards obscure white geometric shapes

in the distance. The air was a wispy, gaseous yellow. The camera looked down at chunks of debris scattered around the black cube. Two of the shapes had human form. Both were silhouetted in black. One was lying down. The other sat, rocking back and forth.

The camera pulled back and the right side of the monitor filled with a dark line of forest that bordered the white concrete.

The camera turned towards the forest and zoomed in at a break in the vegetation. A number of humanoid shapes came into focus, standing at the edge of the concrete.

* * * * *

"There it is. I can see it." Lisa pointed to the small helicopter hovering directly above.

Jake took his communicator from the pedestal. "CLIDE, send S-1 to the buildings. Survey every inch of that area and report back."

The helicopter nosed forward and sped off towards the distant buildings.

When the helicopter was out of range, Jake turned to Lisa. "I heard something unusual before falling asleep." He reached into his knapsack and pulled out two prepackaged insta-dinners, giving one to Lisa. "It sounded like the hum of a power generator." He took a bite of dried protein cake. "Now, that wouldn't be unusual by itself, if I had heard other noises as well. But I didn't." He opened a little can marked CLASS I PUDDING and spooned the contents into his mouth. "I'm beginning to believe that we're going to march into a deserted city."

"If it's deserted," she asked between bites of dehydrated turnover, "how do you account for that sound?"

"I think it's a nuclear generator. But we'll have to wait for confirmation from CLIDE."

"Then"—she put the plastic wrapper down—"where are the people?"

"I think we've already met the people." Jake squashed the empty containers and stuffed them back into their original wrapper. He pulled two fresh filters from the knapsack. "Let's put them on. At least we'll be able to breathe."

* * * * *

The images poured in frame by frame. Each raster scan was examined for signs of life or movement. The binary counters in CLIDE's brain flipped through millions of iterations, always coming up with the same answer: "Negative."

The buildings might have been interesting to a human observer, but to CLIDE, they were simply geometric shapes to be analyzed and stored.

One after another, the same shapes appeared on the screen and

were analyzed by CLIDE's massive processor as geodesic domes and spires interconnected by poured concrete arched passageways. As S-1 swooped down for closer inspection, CLIDE determined that *all* the buildings had exactly the same dimensions and used identical construction techniques. In short, S-1 was exploring a pre-fab city.

The small helicopter followed a preprogrammed grid pattern, crisscrossing the city at the lowest safe altitude. No movement was observed; S-1's sensors detected no life.

CLIDE reported the findings.

"How about electrical energy?"

"Affirmative," CLIDE responded tersely.

"I'll need more than that, CLIDE." Jake rolled his eyes up and shook his head. "What exactly does affirmative mean?"

"An operational fusion generator is located at coordinates 23,45; ten kilometers northwest of center city. This unit is generating 100 megawatts nominal power and dispersing same to the city via microwave link. Seventy-three percent of all enclosures examined exhibit magnetic radiation indicative of electrical power usage."

"I'm almost sorry I asked," Jake said sarcastically. "What does your analysis say about our chances of finding the spare parts we need?"

"Since all the domes are interconnected, it would be logical to gain entrance to the closest building. This dome is 1.57 kilometers distant at a relative heading of 273 degrees."

Jake turned to Lisa. "With all this technology at our fingertips." He held up his communicator. "You'd think we'd have it made. But instead we have a dingaling computer rattling off the obvious while S-1 goes buzzing around like a damn goony bird."

He directed CLIDE to monitor the Weombians' movements and report if they left the forest.

"When the tough get going, the going gets tough, or something like that. Let's go, Lisa, I don't want to spend another night out here."

* * * * *

They stood at the base of a large dome. Pitted white walls shot upwards, bending out of their line of vision. Jake said, "It looks big enough to swallow two spaceships." He ran his hand across the rough surface. "Isn't it amazing how distance can trick you? From the pedestal, this looked as smooth as silk."

They walked in vain around its base, searching for an entrance, until their progress was blocked by an interconnecting tube. "Jake, how do we get into this thing?"

"When in doubt, use brute force." He set his particle beam weapon to maximum, crouched behind a rusted block of metal, and aimed at the base of the dome. "Better stay low. I don't know what this is going to do."

A bolt of blue energy smashed into the pitted wall and small plastic splinters exploded outwards, followed by a rush of cold air that hurled them to the ground. The dust cleared, exposing a jagged hole a few feet above the dome's base.

Lisa brushed herself off, walked to the opening, and bravely poked her head in. "Jake, look at this. It's filled with dried plants!"

He rushed to her side.

The white walls trapped the weak sunlight, diffusing its rays evenly across the dome's walls. The floor was covered with a tangle of dry matted vines that flowed from rows of stainless steel hydroponic troughs running the full length of the dome.

"This is amazing. A self-contained city. This was probably one of their farms. Come on, let's go in."

They carefully squeezed through the opening and waded through the tangled growth towards a recessed door.

They stopped before the airlock. "This time we're going to play it smart. I've got a hunch that there's a lot of pressure behind this door."

Jake leaned against the door and slowly turned the large circular handle. "O.K., here goes." He braced his feet and allowed the door to push him slowly back. As it opened, a stream of cold air whistled through the crack between door and jamb. His face turned red and the muscles on his neck stretched tight. "Lisa, force your way through. I can't hold it back much longer."

She bent forward and squeezed through the small opening. He followed, clinging to the edge of the door, then pulled it closed when he was safely in the corridor.

"Amazing. The air conditioning system is still operational."

They were in an arched corridor, one of the interconnecting tubes between domes. Rows of overhead light cylinders cast an even blue-white light over ribbed walls. The air was clean, dry, and cool.

Lisa took off her filter-mask first. "Oh, Jake, this is heaven. I can actually breathe."

They explored the domed city for hours, heading towards its center. Each dome added another piece to the puzzle of how life must have been before life ended.

They passed through more farm domes, then explored a theater with circular seating and a central stage.

They spent a frustrating hour searching for supplies in a warehouse filled with empty white plastic containers, then continued, in low spirits, to a series of living quarters.

Circular compartments were stacked in honeycomb arrangement against the dome's walls. They entered some of the small rooms. Cots were bolted down in each room's center, and a toilet stood starkly in each left-hand corner.

The total absence of any sign of habitation was unsettling. There

were no dishes, no toys, no books, no garbage; nothing to suggest that the city had ever been lived in.

They left the “hive” and walked through a dimly lit passageway towards another dome entrance. Jake swung the door open, expecting to see more honeycombed dwellings . . . he froze and called to Lisa.

She joined him and they walked through the portal. The door closed silently and they found themselves standing on a sandy beach enveloped in semidarkness. A fresh tropical breeze wafted over them. The night air sang with seagulls, and waves thundered rhythmically against the distant shore. Shimmering white light danced across the ocean’s choppy surface. They looked up. A halo surrounded a full moon and the black sky was studded with stars.

“What do you think, Lisa?”

“My intellect tells me that we’re in a dome.” She reached down and scooped up a handful of sand, letting it run through her fingers. “But I almost believe that we’re at a deserted beach on a beautiful starlit night.”

“Let’s rest.”

They dropped their backpacks to the sand, lay down next to each other, and looked up at the clear night sky.

“This is beautiful. If it weren’t just an illusion.” She leaned over him. “This is the closest I’ve felt to you.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish illusion from reality”—he placed his hands on either side of her face—“and sometimes, I don’t think it makes a difference.”

He pulled her to him and they embraced under imitation stars, on an artificial beach, on an alien planet.

* * * * *

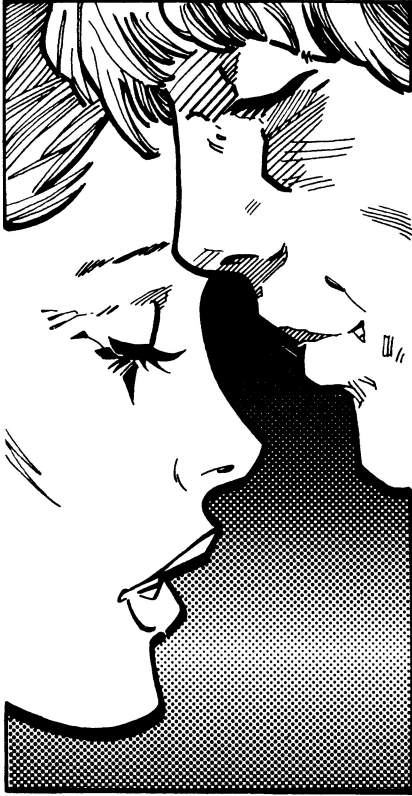
“I almost forgot where we were.” He sat up and brushed off the sand. “Back to reality.” He picked up a handful of sand, clenched his fist, and poured the grains in a neat stream, forming a small pyramid on the ground.

“You know, I was really gung-ho when I joined the corps.” He scooped up another ration of sand. “Do you remember, in training, when they told us how much we were needed? How much good we were going to do? How, without us, the colonies would die?”

She nodded.

“Well, so far we haven’t helped a soul. As far as I can see, we can’t even seem to help ourselves.” He threw the sand to the ground. “First, we’re attacked by Gammalons and almost blown to smithereens, and now, the past half-hour excepted, look at the mess I’ve gotten us into.”

“Hey,” she said softly. “It’s not your fault. We’ve had some bad luck, that’s all. You did the best you could. We all did.”



He pulled her to him and they became one, under imitation stars, on an artificial beach, on an alien planet.

He drew an obscure design in the sand and pouted like a little boy.

"Jake, I'm not happy with our situation either, but I'm not blaming myself, or CLIDE. More importantly, I don't blame you. You may not believe this, but I have a lot of respect for you. Why don't you start respecting yourself?"

"O.K. So I respect myself. What good does that do us now?"

"You've got to believe in yourself before you can expect to help other people. Maybe, in a strange way, this is all a test . . . like basic training. A dress rehearsal for the real thing."

He smiled. "You're probably right, Lisa. Sometimes I tend to get all wrapped up in myself. It really helps to talk things out."

"I consider that a compliment. In fact, that was the nicest thing that's been said to me in a awfully long time. Jake, let me tell you something. Most of the time I'm scared and lonely. I cope by hiding behind a facade of military regs and dress codes."

"Besides Weomby, what's there to fear?"

"It's not so much a fear, but a feeling of emptiness." She took a brush from her bag and ran it through her hair. "When we left Terra, we left our past behind." She put the brush down. "When we were fighting the Gammalons, our parents had been dead for more than four

hundred earth years! It's not something that I'm able to adjust to."

"It's the same for me, Lisa." He was irritated. "I don't want to talk about it."

She pressed him. "Tell me about your family."

"No," he answered flatly. "Let's move on." He stood up and put on his pack. "The only thing we have to be afraid of is not finding the parts we need to get off this place."

Her face tightened. "Yes, sir!" She gathered up her things, stood, and straightened her uniform. "Lead on, oh great white father."

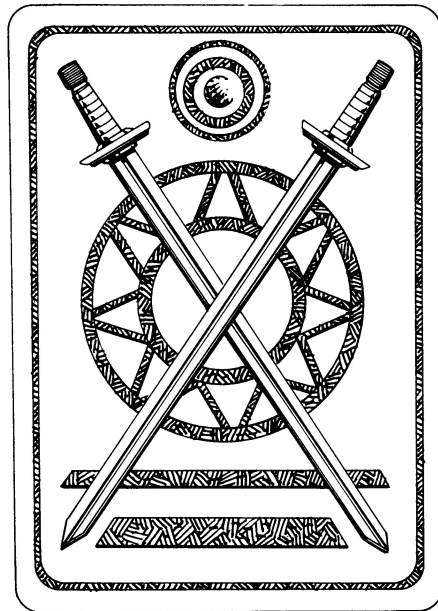
They plowed through the sand towards the shoreline, then walked into the surf and continued on top of the water. They walked above the curling waves, then over the rippling sea, following the moonlit path towards the horizon. Jake stopped where sky blended with sea and brushed his hand across the wall.

A red hue crept up the base of the dome.

As Jake's fingers found the familiar circular handle, a molten orange globe rose brilliantly in front of him. He turned the handle and pulled the door open. A dimly lit arch was punched out of the sun's center. They walked through the sun into the corridor, closed the door, and left the ocean behind.

The return to another quiet corridor had a sobering effect on them. They became nervous and apprehensive. Jake's eyes darted about and Lisa kept looking back, half expecting to see the ocean surge through the airtight door at any moment.

The lighting in the passageway became dimmer as they progressed down its length. It was almost completely dark when they stopped before an ornately engraved door. A golden circle with pointed beams was etched into its face. Crossed swords stood out in bold relief from within the circle's center. A high energy buzzing sound seemed to emanate from the etched sun and a thin line of blue was visible around the door's edge.



Jake cautiously reached for the small knob. His fingers had barely grazed its surface when a snap of energy flung him backwards to the ground. The air smelled of ozone. Jake sat up and looked at his hand. The impression of the knob was burned into his palm.

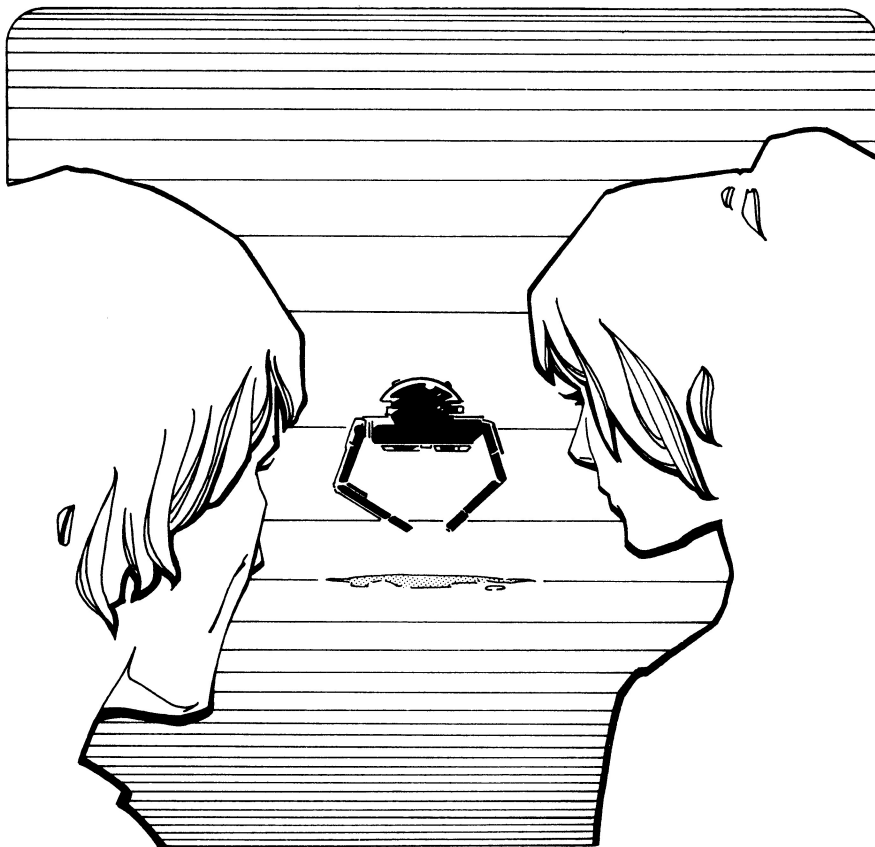
"Yeeow!" He grabbed the hand. "Lisa! Lisa! Get the salve, quick. I really hurt."

She had just started rummaging through his knapsack when a calm feminine voice startled them. "*Clamstor reg nefferani sortag.*"

They both turned. In back of them, a metallic rectangle hovered a few feet off the ground. Pincer-terminated arms stood out from either side of its body and red lights blinked on and off across its face. It hummed softly, waiting for their response.

"What the heck?" Jake turned to Lisa.

"Beats me," she said. "I just hope it's not dangerous. I'd better call CLIDE."



"CLIDE, there's some sort of robot hovering in front of us. It's trying to tell us something. I can't understand a word it's saying. Can you help?"

"Affirmative. Please leave the communicator on and try to get the robot to talk."

"Jake, this is crazy. How do I get a robot to talk?" She had barely finished the sentence when the hovering robot spoke. "*Clamstor reg nefferani sortag.*"

"I've got it," interjected CLIDE. "Basic extrapolation from rudimentary expansionist. The language is quite straightforward."

"CLIDE!" she yelled into the communicator. "What is it saying?"

"Just that it would be very happy to repair Jake's hand."

Jake shook his head. "I'm not going to let some female robot get near my hand. Who says it's qualified?"

"Jake! Don't be chauvinistic. If it were CLIDE, or some other male robot . . ."

"Lisa. This isn't exactly the time for a speech. We're in a pretty hairy situation."

"Well," she answered, "if she can heal the burn, why not let her?" She talked into the communicator. "CLIDE, is there any way to set up communications with the robot?"

"Simple," he answered. "Leave the communicator on and I'll translate directly."

Jake took the communicator from Lisa's hand. "I'm going to find out what's going on." He spoke into the box. "Who are you?"

The robot answered, then, after a slight delay, the communicator translated. "I am Guardian. I am the city's caretaker." Lights blinked randomly across her face as she spoke. "I have been programmed to wait and assist all visitors. Please allow me to repair your hand."

"No way." Jake looked at his wounded hand. "I'm still not going to let that thing near me."

"Stubborn. Jake, you are downright obstinate!" She turned to the robot. "Can you take a look at my back?"

"Be happy to." The robot floated behind her and carefully removed the dressing with her pincer. "Nasty," she said. "Most humans don't survive a Brangteen bite. You're lucky." The robot placed a pincer on each shoulder blade and Lisa's back glowed momentarily with a bright blue aura. "Ah," the robot said with satisfaction, "that should do it. How does it feel?"

"It feels normal. Like I was never injured. Jake, come over and take a look."

"That's amazing. The welts have disappeared. Your back looks completely healed. O.K., you win." Jake reluctantly held out his hand and turned his face away. He was still grimacing when the robot announced, "All finished. Good as new."

"You said you were programmed to help visitors. Well"—Jake looked at his hand and flexed his fingers—"we could use some help."

Our transport's in bad shape. Lots of damage to our navigation and landing electronics."

The robot's face blinked blue and a whirring sound came from its metallic body. "Please establish direct communication between your computer and myself. I will assess the extent of your ship's damage and make appropriate recommendations."

"Sure." Jake talked into the communicator. "CLIDE . . . Link up." The communicator emitted strange high pitched squealing sounds as data flowed between the two computers.

"We have come to a tentative understanding," the robot announced flatly. "The components you require are not in my inventory. It is therefore recommended that I accompany you to your spacecraft and affect repairs."

"What do you think, Lisa?"

"Well"—she thought for a few seconds—"I don't see that we have anything to lose. Even if you do feel uncomfortable with her."

"O.K., I'll buy that, but I want to ask a few questions before we head back." He picked up the communicator and spoke to the robot. "First. What happened here? Where is everybody?"

"Nuclear war. They all died or mutated."

"That just doesn't add up. Why wasn't this city flattened?"

"Neutron bombs. The radiation affected only the living."

"Then"—Jake walked directly in front of the hovering robot—"Where are the bodies?"

"The holocaust occurred more than three hundred Weombian years ago. I've had plenty of time to clean up."

Lisa joined Jake in front of the robot. "I have one last question." She turned and pointed. "What's behind the door?"

"That was the war room, a restricted access area. I'm afraid that I've never been inside, but I do know that no one has ever come out."

"That clinches it, Lisa. I've heard enough. Let's get out of here. This place makes me sick."

They followed the robot to an exit and began to put on their air filters. "No need to do that," she interjected. "I am equipped with atmosphere shields. If you will allow me to hover next to you, my shields will provide a balanced and comfortable breathing environment."

The three left the city and walked across the white field, past the ruined statue, towards the edge of the forest. At their approach, the mutants melted back into darkness. "You have nothing to fear from them," the robot said. "My shields will offer protection."

Jake and Lisa stopped at the forest's edge and took one final look at the city's deceptive beauty. Jake took a deep breath of the clean, robot-generated air, and turned to Lisa. "Let's get back to the ship."

Protected by the robot, they joined hands, and walked into the forest.





≡≡≡ CHAPTER 4 ≡≡≡

SAVE THE COSMOS

The decontamination process went smoothly. Lisa, Jake, and the robot subjected themselves to hot showers followed by bombardment of strong antibacterial rays from overhead lamps.

They rode the cylindrical elevator to the control room in silence. The robot hovered between the two, its flashing lights the only sign that its sensors were absorbing the unfamiliar surroundings.

"It's good to have you back," CLIDE welcomed them as they took their familiar stations at the control console.

Jake spoke first. "CLIDE, we've still got lots of damage. You'd better link up with our new friend and get to work."

The robot floated over to an exposed terminal at the right side of the control panel, inserted its arm, and spoke silently with the onboard computer. The conference complete, it floated through an access door behind the console to begin its repairs.

"Jake." Lisa looked wistful. "Do you think it might be possible to take her with us? She certainly could come in handy around here."

"Frankly, Lisa, I'm against it." He looked worried. "We just don't know enough about that robot. Having it on board might prove dangerous."

"But Jake," she pleaded. "I need someone to talk to, another woman. Someone I can confide in. Even if it's only a robot, at least it's a female."

"Oh, so that's it. You really must feel outnumbered by CLIDE and me."

"It's not really that. I just feel the need to talk to a member of my own sex. And she is well programmed"—she leaned forward for emphasis—"and extremely helpful."

Jake pulled back in his chair and rolled his eyes upwards. He

contorted his face into an expression of disgust and heaved a sigh that seemed to say, "Women. You just can't win!"

"Jake, please be reasonable. Let me explain. I used to have a younger sister." She looked down at her hands. "Her name was Susanna. She followed me around everywhere. Sometimes I thought she was a pain, but I really miss her now. She was someone I could share myself with; she understood me. I could talk to her." She looked straight at Jake. "The robot could be my surrogate sister. I'd like her to stay, and I'd like to call her Suzy."

"I don't know." He continued to look up at the ceiling. "It could be risky. This is one decision that has to be made with unemotional logic." He searched for a diplomatic solution. "I know . . . let's leave it up to CLIDE. We'll both abide by whatever decision he makes. Okay?"

Without waiting for her reply, he spoke to CLIDE. "When that robot . . ."

Lisa interrupted. "Suzy, if you please."

Jake cleared his throat. "when Suzy returns, I want you to perform a complete analysis on"—he paused, then grudgingly continued—"her. I want you to weigh her usefulness against any potential danger she might pose. Considering both these factors, I want you to decide whether she stays or goes."

"What if I decide that she should stay," asked CLIDE, "and she decides not to?"

"Leave that to me," Lisa added.

A soft humming signalled the robot's return. It hovered in the center of the control room, red and green lights flashing. "All repairs complete."

Jake spoke into the communicator. "CLIDE would like to have a word with you."

The little robot floated to the console and hooked up again. Lisa watched the interchange anxiously. She glanced at Jake, who feigned nonchalance by reading the operational status on the screen. Minutes ticked by and tensions mounted. Finally, much to Lisa's relief, the small robot pulled its arm from the socket and hovered next to her chair.

"Suzy has decided to stay," CLIDE announced triumphantly, "and I sanction her decision. She will make an invaluable addition to our crew. Actually, Suzy and I have a lot in common. Same manufacturer and, conceptually, we speak the same languages."

"Oh, Jake. Did you hear that? Suzy can stay! You'll never regret this, CLIDE!"

"All right, all right." Jake was annoyed and a trifle jealous. "We've still got to get off this godforsaken planet. Back to business."

Lisa smiled. "Yes, sir. With pleasure."

* * * * *

The side thrusters were the first to fire, spewing jets of white vapor into the yellow atmosphere. The ship began to right itself, slowly at

first, then faster as the momentum built. It pulled upright, disentangling itself from the grasp of the gnarled tree.

Suddenly, the main thrusters engaged and billows of white hot steam poured out from beneath the craft. The full force of the twin nuclear engines came to bear and the transport struggled, fighting the gravitational pull of the planet. A gigantic explosion blasted through the air as the afterburners kicked in and the ship lunged forward.

Lisa and Jake were squashed down into their contoured chairs, their faces plastered back, their mouths distended, facial features flattened.

The ship accelerated, propelled upwards by the full force of a controlled nuclear explosion.

The screen showed the ground below as they raced away. The trees receded into wide patches of greenish brown and the rectangular shape of white city was soon lost in yellow haze. The curvature of the planet became visible, and then, as the engines automatically shut down, the entire globe filled the screen.

Weomby was once again a glowing, yellow-red jewel, set against a backdrop of black velvet.

"Now that the navigation computer is fixed, we can get on to our next assignment. Want some coffee and something to eat, Lisa?"

"Sure, that sounds great."

"I know what I'm going to have." He rubbed his hands together expectantly. "A nice juicy hamburger." He smacked his lips. "Wait . . . a nice juicy hamburger, with cheese," he exclaimed. "Lettuce, tomato, and topped with crisp bacon. A side order of french fries and, for the *piece de resistance*, a large cola!

Lisa tried her best to ignore him. She calmly entered her order: fillet of sole almondine, wilted spinach salad, and a chilled glass of Chenin Blanc. She leaned back and waited for the food to arrive.

He pressed a button and the food dispenser delivered two steaming cups, followed by two trays heaped with food.

He handed her a cup painted with a large smiling cat and retained his favorite, a mug with a picture of Don Quixote pausing before a windmill. They first toasted their escape from Weomby, sipping the hot liquid with relish, then got down to the serious business of eating.

"This tastes wonderful," she said, then took a measured sip of white wine.

"I couldn't agree more." He wolfed down his food like a starved animal. "You know"—he bit off half the large burger, and sauce dribbled down his chin—"it's the simple pleasures like this that I missed when we were down there." He wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

He casually addressed CLIDE. "How long before you've got an assignment dredged up from your memory banks? I'd just like to know where we go from here." Jake stuffed the empty trays into the disposal while he waited for CLIDE's reply.

"Sir, it may take me some time. The grain supplies that were slated for Nostrum IV were destroyed during our landing on Weomby, and

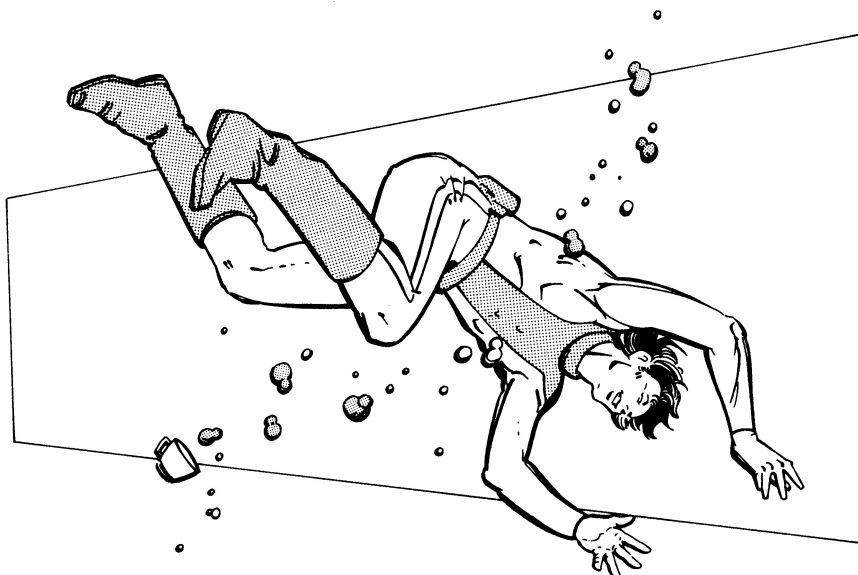
we lost our medical provisions escaping the Gammalons. I have already taken the liberty of advising Nostrum IV of the loss, asking them to find an alternate means of supply. I am currently checking inventory and will assess where our stores will provide the most benefit."

"Lisa, get ready for a little excitement. While CLIDE is working, there's no reason why we can't have a little fun." Jake reached for two yellow buttons on the console.

"What are you doing?"

Jake laughed. "I, my dear, am going to turn off the artificial gravity." He pressed the buttons. "Now!"

Lisa quickly secured her seat belt as Jake began to float above the floor. He pushed off gently from the top of his chair and glided up toward the ceiling. He whooped and laughed, then began to sing an old sea chant: "'Weathered ships and cutters,' said the captain to the boatswain, 'so come with me and we'll leave now, in a ship that sails the ocean!'"



"Jake, get down from there!"

"You're just jealous." He laughed. "Party pooper." The coffee had floated out of their cups and formed into perfect globes that floated about the cabin. "Watch this." Jake swooped down and hovered with his mouth next to one of the shimmering globes. He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, discarded the innards, and put the hollow tube in his mouth. He stuck the makeshift straw into a globule and drew in. "Now, this is the way to drink coffee. Lisa, why don't you unbuckle and try it for yourself?"

"Not me, Jake. Someone has to have both feet planted firmly on solid ground, and it looks like that person has to be me."

"Phew. Back to your old self again." He bounced to the ceiling and hung upside down. He poked his fingers into the corners of his mouth, pulled them apart, and stuck out his tongue.

"Jake, get down here. You're disgusting!"

He laughed.

A modulated buzzing sounded on the communications console. Lisa turned her attention away from Jake and plugged in her headset.

"What's going on?" he called from above. She didn't answer. With the headset on, she was isolated. Static filled her head as she tried to concentrate. She thought she could make out a faint human voice and turned the volume control to maximum.

Jake pushed off from the ceiling and groped for his chair. He pulled himself in, and fastened his seatbelt. He reset the two yellow buttons, turning on the artificial gravity, then plugged in his head set. He glanced at Lisa's panel and adjusted his frequency readout to match hers.

"We are being attacked . . ." The voice faded in and out, interrupted by bursts of static. "If this goes on much longer," another burst of static, "please help."

Jake switched on the speaker and pulled off his headset. Lisa removed hers. "Can you get a fix on that signal?"

"It's erratic, but I can give it a try." The voice began again, "Microbes. Millions of them. We'll try . . ." Static. ". . . can only pray that our message . . ."

"I've got a fix, Jake!"

He unbuckled and walked behind her. "There it is." She pointed to a small, panel-mounted monitor. "I'll put it up on main screen and have the Nav-Computer plot us a course."

She pushed a button and the main screen duplicated her display. A grid covered the screen. At its center, a small light blinked. One black arrow pointed towards the light, and another flashed to indicate their present position. As the Nav-Computer went to work, a golden line drew itself from their position, skirting unseen obstacles, to connect with their destination. A series of X,Y vectors were displayed at each bend of the golden line.

"Let's go on auto. The course looks good to me." Lisa nodded, and punched the Auto-Nav button. A pulsing cross, their ship, began to move slowly along the line towards their destination.

"See if you can establish contact. It looks like we're headed for Palo Cosmos."

"Palo Cosmos? Are you sure, Jake? I never heard of the place."

"To be honest with you, neither have I. But"—Jake handed her a printed readout, "that's about what it says."

Lisa put on her headset and spoke into a wire-thin microphone that

dangled, almost invisibly, in front of her mouth. "Palo Cosmos, Palo Cosmos, this is Eggtube Transport two delta seven sixer, do you read?" She paused, waiting for a reply, then repeated the call.

"Just static, Jake . . . Wait a minute, I think I've got something."

"Put it on the speaker."

"Your signal . . ." Static. "But we are receiving . . ."

"Palo Cosmos, this is two delta seven sixer. We are coming to provide assistance. Our ETA is . . ." She turned to Jake.

"The readout says seven hours."

"Seven hours," she repeated into the microphone.

"Roger. Understand seven."

"Lisa, see if you can find out what their emergency is."

She asked, but was only told by the faint, panicky voice. "Microbes. Tell you more on arrival. Contact when you establish orbit. We'll send shuttle. Out."

"Well, I guess that's it for now. Better get some shut-eye." Jake yawned. "I have a feeling we're in for some excitement tomorrow."

Lisa stood up and stretched, then walked off to her quarters, followed by Suzy. Jake propped his feet up on the console and leaned back in his chair. CLIDE dimmed the control room lights and Jake fell asleep within seconds.

* * * * *

The Auto-Nav worked while they slept. The blinking representation of their ship moved steadily, with computer precision, over the golden course-line towards Palo Cosmos. An hour before planet-fall, CLIDE slowly brightened the interior of the control room and whispered, "Time to get up, sir."

Jake yawned and rolled over on his side. "Sir." CLIDE was insistent. "We'll be arriving in an hour."

"All right, all right." He shook his head. "I was just in the middle of a harem. You have a terrible sense of timing, CLIDE."

"Sorry, sir. Just doing my duty."

"Why don't you wake up Sleeping Beauty while I get a cup of coffee?"

"Sleeping Beauty?"

"Just wake up Lisa. Please, CLIDE."

"Yes, sir."

Jake was tired to the bone. He had slept in the control room out of a perverted sense of duty. Now, rubbing his back, he wished he hadn't. He sipped his coffee slowly, savoring the flavor, and waited for the hot liquid to infuse life into his system.

"Jake, you look great. Really wonderful." She seemed to bounce into the room. "I had a great night's sleep. I even had a long talk with Suzy. Seriously, Jake, you should take better care of yourself." She accepted a cup of coffee from the dispenser and took a sip, then looked

at him with an appraising eye. "Hmm. Rumpled shirt." She walked over to his side and scrutinized his face. "Needs a shave, doesn't he, Suzy? And look at his hair. Looks like a bird's nest."

Suzy had followed her in, and now hovered above the control console. She signalled her agreement by gaily flashing her green and red lights.

"This is too much." Jake stood up and straightened his shirt. "I'm the captain of this vessel. CLIDE, whoever gave those two Wonderwomen the right to criticize me? Don't they know that hidden behind this scruffy exterior"—he scowled—"lies a scruffy interior?" He walked indignantly toward his room.

Lisa followed him with her eyes. "Jake." He spun around. "Just kidding." Then she began to laugh. Jake entered his room and slammed the door with a resounding bang.

"These men, Suzy. Just can't take a joke!"

When Jake returned, he looked like a different person. He wore his dress uniform: spit-shined black shoes, navy blue pants striped with gold, and a sky blue starched shirt with golden epaulettes. His youthful face was clean shaven and his dark hair was combed neatly into place. He smiled smugly. "Ladies, the captain has arrived on the bridge. Don't I get piped aboard?"

Lisa did her best to avoid looking at him. She smiled to herself and winked at Suzy. "Jake, I must admit this is an improvement."

He put his hand to his mouth and, in what he thought was a dignified gesture, cleared his throat. He walked stiffly to his chair. "We'll be visiting with civilized people, or so I hope. I just hope you ladies are up to it."

She smiled at him. "You know something, Jake." He perked up expectantly. "Sometimes I think you get carried away with yourself."

* * * * *

The radio blasted, "I'll be docking in three minutes."

"We'd better get down to the airlock and greet our guest. CLIDE, I'm going to leave Suzy with you in case you need any repairs. Lisa and I will go down and find out what this is all about."

The shuttle craft nosed gently into the airlock. Its nose hatch opened, followed by a whooshing sound of decompression. A lean, bearded man ambled into the chamber. He took in the surroundings with an easy, relaxed air. A broad smile spread across his suntanned face. His blue eyes seemed to dance with merriment. He stood tall, with dignity, and offered his hand to Jake.

He nodded his head and smiled as they shook hands. "High tech, man," he said in a relaxed tone. "Name's Hank." He nodded at Lisa, his eyes fixed on her face. His smile broadened. "All right," he commented approvingly.



He took in his surroundings with an easy, relaxed air.

Jake stood stiffly in his starched uniform, unable to formulate a response. He finally blurted out, "Welcome, ah, aboard, ah, our ship."

"Right, man. You're just in time."

"I should hope so," Jake continued, a little annoyed. "We raced halfway across the galaxy to help you."

"Hey man, no problem. Relax. You know what I mean?" He smiled at Lisa. "Do you like natural foods?"

"What?" she replied.

"You know, veggies. Like, large red tomatoes, cucumbers." He sketched a circle with his hands. "Alfalfa sprouts," he said gleefully.

"Oh," was the best she could manage.

"We're having a bottling party," he said cryptically, "and we could sure use your help. Cabernet, and our house specialty, Cosmos."

"What about the microbes?" Jake asked. "What about the emergency?"

"We do have a problem." His tone became serious. "But bottling comes first."

Jake shrugged his shoulders and reluctantly followed the tall man into the shuttle.

The craft was ancient, jet propelled, with barely enough room for the three of them. Lisa sat on Jake's lap in the right-hand seat and Hank took the controls. He forced a tight-fitting white helmet over his bushy hair, leaving his chin strap dangling, then picked up a clipboard and pencil and began filling in a printed form.

Jake noticed a crudely drawn bunch of grapes painted on the side of Hank's helmet, then looked down at the clipboard in the tall man's lap. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Checklist." Hank's tone was condescending, as if talking to a novice. "We don't go anywhere until I've finished the checklist. It not only makes sense, but it's regulations." He paused. "My regulations," he said with a smile.

"Your regulations?" Lisa asked.

"I'm the Provincial Governor," he said in a matter of fact way, tapping a sticky gauge with the end of the pencil. "All right. Looking good. Get ready for the ride of your life."

He pulled a red-knobbed handle back slowly and the craft eased from the side of the transport. He pushed the handle forward to its limit and the small ship shot forwards with a screaming, high-pitched whine. It plummeted down towards the planet like a flaming meteor. Its pointed nose glowed red and hot sparks flew back towards the cockpit as the tiny shuttle tunneled through the atmosphere. "Hold on to your hats. Here we go," he shouted above the noise.

He pulled back on the control stick and the shuttle skipped over a layer of atmosphere like a flat rock skimmed across the surface of a still pond.

Jake held Lisa tightly, each jolt threatening to fling her through the flimsy plexiglass canopy above.

"Eeyow!" Hank shouted with each bounce, "Eeyow!"

He leaned the ship into a tightly banked turn and spiralled down towards the surface. "Look at that." He pointed down. "Isn't that about the most beautiful sight in the world?"

Jake couldn't look. He was dizzy and his stomach heaved . . . it was all he could do to hold it back. He turned towards Hank, smiled bravely, and nodded.

Lisa was enthralled. The similarity to Earth astonished her. The beauty of the place was overwhelming. She couldn't pull her eyes away.

Lush green hills rolled lazily towards the setting sun at the horizon. Lakes and small ponds mirrored the blue of a cloudless sky, and neat cultivated plots dotted the landscape. Dusk came quickly. She looked below and could see the twinkling lights of a small community.

"That's it," Hank said proudly, "Palo Cosmos."

He levelled the craft, pulled its nose up, and turned onto final approach. "There's the airport," he said, "dead ahead." They followed a row of strobe lights to the runway. Hank pulled back on the stick. The tires screeched, emitting small puffs of smoke as they careened down the asphalt. He straightened the shuttle and pumped the brakes.

Jake closed his eyes as Hank swerved recklessly off the runway onto the service ramp. He pulled the small shuttle to a neat halt at the side of the field. "Welcome to Palo Cosmos," he said heartily. "End of the line. Everybody off."

The canopy swung open and Hank leaped to the ground and quickly chalked the wheels. He sauntered under the shuttle to help his passengers down. "Give me your hand," he called up to Jake.

"No thanks," Jake said, "I can make it." He swung both legs over the side of the cockpit, looked down, then closed his eyes and jumped.

Hank braced him as he landed. Jake brushed off his clean uniform, completely ignoring the other man, and stiffly looked up at Lisa. To regain his dignity, he offered, "I'll help you down."

"No thanks, Jake. You look a bit shaky." Her rebuff hurt but he smiled and watched with thinly concealed anger as Hank placed his arms around Lisa and gently lowered her to the ground.

"We'll walk." Hank pointed towards a cluster of peaked roofed houses nestled at the base of a vine-covered hill. "My place is over there, the one in the center. It's less than a mile."

They walked down a straight dirt path, bordered by evenly spaced trees. The night was warm, and a subdued scent of lemon blossoms floated in the air. Crickets chirped loudly and a lone nightwren sang its short, repetitive song.

The sound of laughter became louder as they neared the house. "They're really wailin'," Hank said as they approached.

The house was two stories, constructed of wood, with a gabled roof. Most of the windows were of bevelled glass, leaded and inset with diamond shapes. A large stained-glass window to the left of the opened door sparkled with the reds and greens of two tulips bending to the wind.

Wooden steps led up to a broad, covered porch wrapped around the front of the house.

Hank turned to Jake and Lisa. "Come on in and join the party."

Jake didn't budge. "Before we go in, I'd like you to tell me what your big emergency is. We didn't spend all that fuel just to go to a party."

Hank looked down at him from one step above. "You're just going to have to ease into this one, Jake. There's something inside I have to show you before you'll understand how serious this situation is. Can you relate to that?"

"I guess I don't have much choice." He reluctantly followed Hank inside.

They walked through a smoky foyer that was packed with animated bodies. Most of the men had scraggly beards, similar to Hank's, and all the women had long hair and wore colorful, low-cut dresses. Somebody shouted, "Far out!" as they pushed their way into the house, and Jake grasped Lisa's hand.

Someone else yelled, "Eyow! Eyow! Hank! . . . all right!" Hank raised his right hand above his head, extended his thumb and index finger to make a "C," and shouted back, "Cosmos! Right on!" He lowered his arm to Jake's shoulder and guided them towards the kitchen.

The kitchen was a hubbub of activity. Two steaming kettles filled with green soup bubbled on a gas stove, filling the room with an earthy aroma. An older woman, her white hair tied in a bun, stirred the brew with a long wooden spoon. "This soup is out of sight," she said when Hank arrived. He ambled over, put his arms around her waist, and pulled her to him in a loving bear hug.

He motioned to Jake and Lisa and led them to a group of people working around a table at one side of the kitchen. He rested his hand on an iron-banded oak barrel that sat on the table. "This is Cosmos wine . . . the galaxy's finest."

A short, bearded man with glasses held a piece of clear plastic tubing that extended from the side of the barrel. He inserted the free end into a green-tinted wine bottle. Red liquid coursed through the tube. When the bottle had filled to within an inch of its top, the man squeezed the tubing, cutting off the liquid's flow. He handed the full bottle to a woman standing at a corking machine, and picked up an empty to repeat the process.

"Isn't this fascinating, Jake? I've never seen a real bottling operation."

"That's nothing," Hank interjected, "wait till you taste the wine. I'll get a bottle. Cosmos needs to age in the bottle as well as in the barrel."

The wall was a honeycombed wine rack. Hank ran his fingers across it, searching for the right bottle. "Ah, this is the year." He gently removed a dusty green bottle. He picked up a wine-stained towel, wiped off the dust, then reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pronged cork extractor. The cork came out with a resounding pop, and a smile spread across his face. "Grab a couple of wine glasses and follow me. This is primo wine."

Before they could move, a slender, dark haired woman who was carrying a half empty wine glass staggered up to Hank. High cheekbones gave her an aura of youth. On close inspection, finely etched crow's feet could be seen spreading from the corners of her eyes. Hank said, "I'd like you to meet my old lady, Vine."

Jake bowed formally and extended his hand, "Ensign Jake Stinger, at your service."

"Oh, really?" She ignored his gesture. "And who . . . is this?" She stared coldly at the younger woman. "Hank, you didn't tell me we were going to have visitors."

"Vine! Vine!" A thin young man was elbowing his way towards them. "Vine, they're playing Purple Smut." He was out of breath. "Let's dance!"

Vine turned towards him and smiled. "Purple Smut. I can relate to that. See you later, Hank." She turned to face Lisa. "It was real. Know what I mean?" She grabbed the young man's hand and dragged him out of the room.

Lisa looked quizzically at Jake. "What does she mean?" Jake shrugged his shoulders. "This whole setup is a little strange," he said.

A pained expression flitted across Hank's face. He quickly regained his "Hearty Governor" manner. "I think it's about time you two had a taste of Cosmos. Follow me." He led them to his private study and closed the door on the party.

Shelves lined three of the room's walls; a large picture window spread across the fourth wall, looking out over straight rows of grape vines. An ornately hand-crafted wooden desk stood solidly in front of the window. The floor was polished oak; its only covering a circular throw rug with embroidered grapes in its center. Chemistry books covered one complete wall; another group of shelves on either side of the door was devoted to books on viniculture. Glass flasks, test tubes, bunsen burners, delicate scales, and assorted chemical apparatus were neatly displayed on the third row of shelves.

Hank pulled three straight-backed chairs to the desk. "Please sit down and let me pour." He tipped each glass, rested the lip of the bottle against its rim, and poured the red wine in a gentle stream. "Don't want to bruise the grape," he explained.

Jake picked up his glass and brought it to his lips. Hank shouted, "Don't!" Jake quickly pulled the glass away.

"Not yet, man. First we'll look at the color." Hank revolved his glass slowly and held it up to the light. "Look at it sparkle. Perfection, not a trace of sediment. Now for the nose." He swirled the wine and brought the glass to his nose. Jake and Lisa imitated his actions. "You can smell the grape. Take a deep whiff. Isn't that beautiful?" They both shook their heads. "Now, the moment of truth." He brought the glass to his lips, tilted it, and took a sip. He sloshed it back and forth in his mouth, then leaned his head back, and gargled before swallowing. "Out of sight. Words can't describe it."

"You know, Hank"—Jake was beginning to relax—"this is really great wine. I've never tasted anything so good." Hank reached over and refilled his glass. Lisa took another sip. "I have to agree with Jake. This is absolutely the best. How do you do it?"

"That's partially why I called you down here." He lifted his glass to the light and swirled the deep lavender liquid. "This wine, this Cosmos, is a product of three generations of hard, dedicated work. I think a short history lesson is in order." He graciously refilled Lisa's half empty glass, then leaned back in his chair, savoring the Cosmos.

"My great-great-grandfather was one of the founders of Palo Cosmos." He paused to sip more wine. "They were desperate pioneers from Earth, all former computer programmers driven from their homes, their way of life, when computers learned to program themselves."

Jake and Lisa leaned forward, and Hank continued. "They came from a land rich in technology and equally abundant in natural resources. They called it 'Silicon.' It must have been beautiful."

Hank poured himself another glass of Cosmos. He slumped in his chair. "When they weren't programming, they made wine, had parties like the one here tonight, and rode bicycles. It must have been beautiful." He emptied his glass and refilled it to the brim.

"We here at Palo Cosmos strove to recreate the best of what our forefathers had . . . the perfect society. And we succeeded beyond the dreams of our grandparents. Until now." He stood up, walked behind his desk, and pulled a bottle from a drawer. He quickly opened it and returned to pour all around. "To your health." He raised his glass in salute, then downed its contents in a single swallow.

"This"—he held up the bottle—"was our crowning achievement. Cosmos . . . the finest varietal wine ever grown. It took three generations, man." He was beginning to slur his words. "This is not a blend, man." He leaned forward, almost touching noses with Jake. "This is a varietal. Do you know what that means?"

Jake pulled back, "Ah, I think so."

Hank's face was turning red. "This"—he lifted the bottle—"is made

from one type of grape, man. And that grape, Cosmos, is the perfect combination of the Cabernet, the Pinor Noir and Zinfindel.” He paused. “Can you relate to that?”

Jake wasn’t sure if he could, but to play it safe he blurted out, “I sure can relate to that, Hank.”

This seemed to appease Hank. He took another swallow of wine and continued. “The Cosmos vine is being attacked! Destroyed by an invisible invader. We don’t know why, but the Cosmos plants are the only ones affected. We’re running out of time. If this epidemic isn’t curbed soon, there won’t be anything left but a pile of dried grape leaves.” He looked sad. “Three generations, man. Can you understand where I’m coming from?” He drained the remains of the bottle into his glass.

“This may be our last bottling party.” He took a sip of wine. “The last for Cosmos. Did you notice that little man wearing glasses out there?” He didn’t wait for a reply. “He was emptying the last barrel of Cosmos. The final bottling party.” Hank looked down at his wine.

“Hey, Hank,” Jake tried to cheer him up. “There must be an answer. And if there is,” he added bravely, “we’ll find it. Right Lisa?”

“I don’t know, Jake. We’ve got to have more to go on.” Her face was expressionless. “It sounds like your plants are being attacked by a very selective microbe.” She paused. “First, we’ve got to isolate it, then find out what makes it tick. Then, and only then, can we wipe it out. Jake, Hank, I’ve got to be honest with you.” She looked down at her hands. “I don’t think it’s going to be possible.”

Hank slumped in his chair. “Why not?” he asked.

“We don’t have the equipment.” She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. “We lost all our medical supplies, scanning microscopes included, during a run-in with some Gammalon pirates. I’m sorry, Hank.” She looked up. “I don’t think we’re going to be much help.”

“Wait a minute, Lisa.” Jake stood up. “Don’t be so sure. There’s always a solution, and I’m going to find it.” He looked at Hank. “This is the best wine I’ve ever tasted, and I’ll find a way to save it. I just need some time to think.”

“Righteous, man.” Hank extended his hand towards Jake’s, bending his thumb and index finger to make a “C.” “Form a ‘C’ with yours and touch mine.”

Their fingers touched, forming a circle. “To Cosmos, man. To Cosmos, the perfect balance, the perfect blend. To the wholeness of the universe.”

Hank repeated the greeting with Lisa, finishing with a warm hug.

He pulled away and smiled. “You two look like you could use a little nourishment. The soup should be ready. We’ll have some, then I think I’ve got the perfect place for us to think the problem out.”

As Hank arrived, a number of the merrymakers raised their hands in the familiar “C” salute and shouted their greetings. He responded with a hearty, “Right on!” then led Lisa and Jake to the stove. Big Momma was still standing over the green brew. Her grey hair was now undone and hung over her shoulders, making her look like a plump witch. Her face was wet with perspiration and her eyes were glazed and red.

She offered a spoonful of soup to Hank.

He took the spoon, tilted it, and let the steaming liquid run into his opened mouth. “Heavy.” He shook his head. “You’ve done it again, Tilly.” He hugged her, then called to Jake and Lisa, “This soup’s almost as good as Cosmos.” He reached into an overhead cabinet and brought down three wooden bowls. He ladled the thick green soup into the bowls and passed them around. “We don’t use spoons. Just tip the bowls and enjoy.” He took a healthy swallow, setting the example, then put the bowl down and reached for a long, crusted loaf of bread. He tore it into thirds and handed large chunks of warm bread to Lisa and Jake. “Dip it in the soup. It’s out of sight.”

Jake ate ravenously, with gusto, slurping down the soup, then wiping the bowl clean with the bread. “What’s in this, anyway? It’s delicious.”

Hank answered between mouthfuls. “This is Tilly’s specialty. Freshly picked peas, sausage, a pinch of curry, fresh ginger and”—his face lit up—“just a touch of Cosmos.” He smiled. “Have some more. Help yourself.” He handed Jake the ladle.

Someone shouted from the living room, “Down Right Obnoxious, Down Right Obnoxious!” and the woman leaped from the table. She dashed through the kitchen, holding the hem of her dress up with one hand, followed by her admirers. Tilly said a fast, “Later,” and waddled off behind the mob. Jake and Lisa were stunned. Hank leaned his head back and laughed heartily.

“I don’t understand.” Jake shook his head. “I just don’t get it.” Lisa also looked puzzled.

Hank put a hand on each of their shoulders and said reassuringly, “Just a new rock group. If you ask me, confidentially”—he winked—“‘Down Right Obnoxious’ is just that.” They all laughed and Lisa said, in her best Palo Cosmos, “I can relate to that, man.”

“Now that everyone’s spacing out in the livingroom, we can do some conceptualizing in the hot tub.” Hank searched through the honeycombed wine rack. “I’ll pick a nice bottle of brandy to keep us company”—he extracted an ancient-looking bottle—“and, a nice big snifter.” He rummaged around in a glass-doored cabinet and took out an oversized snifter glass.

Walking through the raucous livingroom on their way to the patio,

Hank spotted Vine. She was hopping up and down in the center of the room, doing what appeared to be slam dance, with a stork-like, bearded professor. Hank held the back door open with his body, waiting for them to walk outside, then let it close.

A vine-covered wooden lattice obscured the stars. Twin moons hid behind a large gnarled oak tree, and the air was fresh and crisp. Hank took a deep breath. "It's beautiful. I just hope we never change it." He looked old for a moment. He walked to a row of grape vines at the edge of the patio and picked a mold-covered grape. He held it gently in his large hand. "Let's go to the hot tub and find a solution."

It looked like a large wine vat that had been sawed in half. Hank explained. "This is a genuine artifact. My great-great-grandfather brought this with him in pieces. They rebuilt it after they landed." Undressing, he lowered himself into the water, and motioned for Jake and Lisa to join him.

Hank smiled at them through clouds of steam, uncorked the brandy, splashed some into the glass, and toasted, "Here's to Lisa, a welcome addition to the community, and an honorary Palo Cosmic." He raised the snifter. "To your health, Jake"—he took a swig—"which will improve immensely after you've relaxed in a hot tub. It's a great place for thinking things through."

Once submerged, Jake's body unlimbered completely. He leaned his head against the tub's side, breathed the mixture of steam and crisp night air, and looked up at the stars.

Hank floated the snifter towards him. "Have some, Jake. It'll help."

Jake picked up the warm glass and inhaled the strong aroma. "Wow. Just smelling this stuff is enough to do you in." He tipped it back and took a healthy swallow. "Ahh. Makes my head swim." He floated the brandy to Lisa and she followed his example.

Jake leaned back so that only his head could be seen above the swirling water. "I don't have a body. I only have a head. No body," he exclaimed, "only a head. Fantastic!"

"Mellow. Right?" Hank said, and they both responded in their best Palo Cosmic, "Mellow."

Jake helped himself to more brandy. "You know," he began tentatively, "I think I may have a solution to the microbe problem. But"—he paused—"I don't know how well it's going to go over." He looked at Lisa. "Especially with you."

Lisa leaned her head back and laughed. "Oh, come off it, Jake. It can't be that bad. Let us in on your plan."

Jake became serious. "You're not going to like this, Lisa, but it may be the only way. Suzy is the answer, I know it. If you really want to help Hank, Suzy will have to stay."

She was shocked. "Suzy is like a sister to me. I can't"—she paused—"I won't give her up."

"Now you're both upright," Hank interjected. "How do you manage it? And in a hot tub!"

Lisa turned on him. "You stay out of this, Hank," she warned, "this is between me and Jake."

"Why shouldn't he be involved?" Jake protested. "His vines are dying! He has the most at stake!"

Hank took another drink. "Heavy. This is really a heavy trip. Why don't you two kick back and relate?"

"He does deserve an explanation, Lisa." Jake told how they had found Suzy, of the robot's healing powers, and explained that she was Lisa's surrogate sister.

"A robot?" Hank asked.

"Not just a robot," Lisa said protectively. "She's my sister."

"You must really miss your sister." Hank floated the snifter to her. "Where is she?"

Lisa took a long swallow of brandy. "She's dead."

"Dead?"

"Space travel has its disadvantages," she explained. "Travelling close to the speed of light, combined with suspended sleep, leaves a lot of the past behind." She took another drink.

"I can relate to that. How long has she been gone?"

Lisa sighed. "Over three hundred years."

Hank smiled. "Suppose you could go back? Suppose you could be reunited with your sister?" She looked at him suspiciously, fighting back tears. "I'm not putting you on," he said calmly. "It is possible."

Jake was skeptical. "I don't believe it. It just can't be done."

"It can, and it has." Hank assured them. "But first you're going to have to tell me more about this robot of yours. Is it a Mark VI self-programmable? If it is, we can't allow it on Palo Cosmos. It's against our constitution."

"I'm not really sure, but we can verify that with CLIDE, our on board computer."

"When you contact your computer," Hank said, "also find out how effective the robot will be against our grape plague. If she can really help"—he turned to Lisa—"you might not be giving up as much as you believe. You may be reunited with your sister . . . and sooner than you think."

"Is it really possible, Hank?"

"You talk to your on board computer, while I rap with my people. Then, if everything is copacetic, I'll show you how to contact the Oracle."

"The Oracle?"

Hank laughed. "First things first . . . let's get back to the house. We have some heavy decisions to make."

* * * * *

The meeting was boisterous. Hank stood on top of the dining room table, trying to quiet the mob.

"I know you're all a little excited. I can't blame you. You've worked hard. The harvest never comes easy." He motioned with his hands for quiet and spoke louder. "This is an emergency meeting. Please try and straighten up." He shouted, "We've got to take a vote!" Someone shouted back, "No way, man. No way!" He tried pleading, "Pull yourselves together. For Cosmos," and was met with drunken shouts.

The professor pushed his way through the crowd and looked up at Hank. "Where do you think you're coming from, man? We'll never accept a computer in our midst. That was what ruined our forefathers." His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he spoke. "Do you want the same thing to happen to us?"

Hank glared down at him. "Three generations of work may be wasted, lost"—he paused—"because of people with narrow attitudes."

He bent down and grabbed a bottle of Cosmos. He looked out over the congregation. "This might as well be the last bottle!" He lifted the bottle above his head, pulled his arm back, and hurled it angrily against the wall. A hush fell over the room. All eyes turned to watch the red liquid swirling down against the plaster.

Hank lowered his voice. "It is not a computer. It is a robot," he lectured patiently. "I am only asking for your vote of confidence." He raised his voice. "Will you accept this robot?" No one moved. "To save Cosmos!" he shouted.

There was movement at the back of the room. A middle-aged woman broke the silence. "I can relate to that." She raised her hand and formed a "C." "To Cosmos!" Her admirers began shouting, "Right on! Right on!" and the whole room shook with yells of approval.

Hank elbowed his way through the Cosmic crowd, searching for Jake and Lisa. He brushed into Tilly. "Hank, I'm on my way to the kitchen"—she held the wooden spoon in her hand—"to make more soup. We're going to beat the bugs!" She smiled broadly. "This calls for another party!"

Hank said, "Out of sight!" He watched her retreat and headed for the foyer.

They were sitting on the front porch stoop. Jake's arm was around Lisa's shoulder. Their heads rested against each other.

A door slammed behind them, and footsteps approached. "I quelled the angry mob." Hank's voice was bubbly. "How did you make out with your computer?"

They pulled apart and Jake looked up. "CLIDE says there's no problem. Suzy's more robot than computer, and she can do the job."

Hank was relieved. "Well, that settles that. I'm sure you're going to see your sister. And"—he had a hard time getting the words out—"I

know you'll be happy. The two of you. You've really got it together."

He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a crumpled sheet of parchment. He carefully unfolded it, knelt down, and spread it out on the floor. "Let's get down to business, as our founding fathers used to say. This is a star map." He ran his fingers across the faded lines and numbers. "With this, you'll be able to reach Quest." He pointed to a small planet at the edge of the map. "And on Quest, you will seek the Oracle."

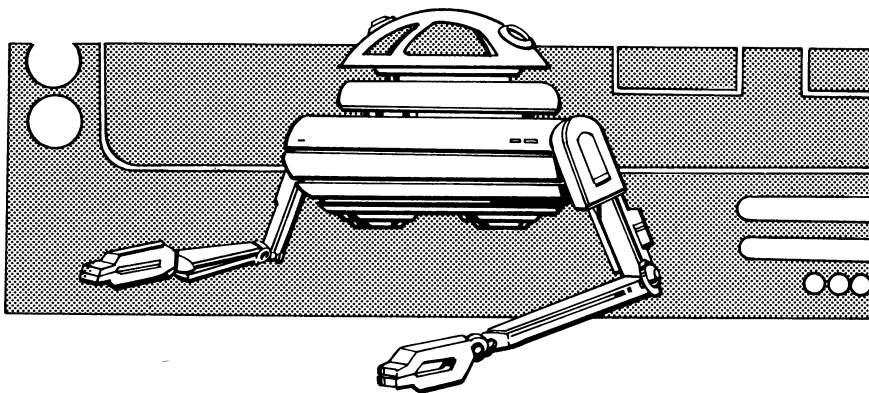
Jake looked suspiciously at the document.

"Jake." Their eyes met. Hank searched through his vocabulary for the right words. "I'm telling it like it is. This piece of paper"—he brushed his hand across the parchment—"is a national treasure. It was a gift from the Oracle, given to our founding fathers during their voyage from Earth to Palo Cosmos. They used it to guide them." He carefully folded the map and handed it to Lisa. "Use it to find your dream."

"Let's go to the shuttle." He stood and helped them up. "It's time you two were on your way."

* * * * *

Suzy hovered next to Hank in the airlock. Her red and green lights pulsed slowly, as if to show her sadness.



Hank smiled. "Don't worry, Lisa. I'll take good care of her. After all, she's going to save the Cosmos. And"—he raised his hand in the "C" salute—"she'll be a natural." Suzy's right arm lifted and her pincers formed a "C." "See what I mean?" He laughed and his eyes sparkled.

Lisa held Jake's hand and took a deep breath. "Bye, Suzy." She held back tears and added, "Goodbye . . . Hank." Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned and marched back to the control room.

She collapsed into her chair and forced herself to concentrate on performing the routine escape-orbit systems check.

Jake walked in, sat down next to her, and watched her flinch as the airlock slammed shut. "It's not that bad, Lisa. After all, we're going to see your real sister."

"Jake," she said unemotionally, "give CLIDE the bearings to Quest. Let's get it over with."



== CHAPTER 5 ==

ORACLE

“Prepare yourselves for teleportation.” The voice was impatient, angry, and cruel. “Stand!” it commanded. “Now!” Jake and Lisa obeyed.

Jake’s head faded into small, glowing particles as his molecules were pulled apart, rearranged, and converted from matter into energy. Lisa stared at his dissolving form in terror, knowing she would be next. Jake’s head disappeared, his shoulders disintegrated. His torso and legs bounced with energy and were gone.

Her eyes opened wide. She was totally alone. Suddenly, her head began to buzz. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t scream, she was being torn apart. She blacked out.

The teleportation occurred instantly. “Jake!” Her jaw hung down, facial skin taut against her high cheekbones. “Jake? Is that you?”

He was standing next to her, maintaining the same pose, the exact stance he had when they were on the bridge of the ship. But they weren’t on the ship. They were . . . on an alien world!

They couldn’t speak. The bleakness of their surroundings frightened them. The infinite expanse dwarfed them.

She turned her head slowly, and tentatively explored the strange environment with her eyes.

They stood in the center of a flat plain, knee-deep in still, blue grass that stretched unbroken to the horizon. A dull, orange sky arched above like a gigantic inverted bowl. The air was stagnant and stale. They felt as if in a vacuum.

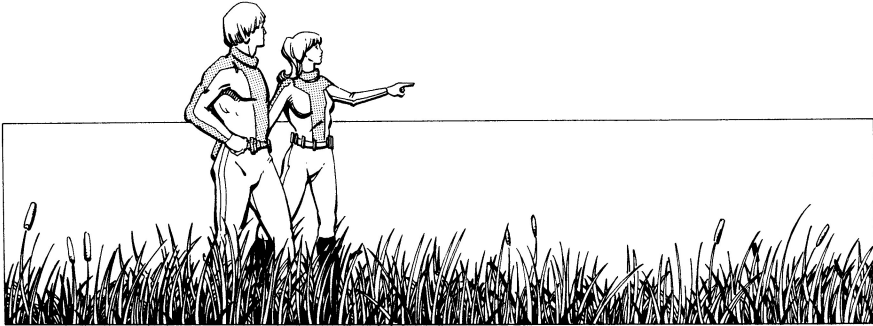
Lisa instinctively reached for Jake’s hand. Jake’s fingers wrapped around hers. “Where are we?” He sounded dazed and confused. “This can’t be Quest? Can it?”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know, Jake. I just don’t know.”

They stood motionless for what seemed an eternity as the cloudless sky slowly darkened to deep orange, then lavender, to pitch black.

Her confidence drained away with the last rays of light and she shivered, feeling helpless and out of control. "I've got to hold together," she thought, "I've got to remain calm."

Suddenly, twinkling lights jumped out from the darkness on the horizon. Lisa snapped back to life. "What is it, Jake?"



He eased the pistol from its holster and held it in his shaking hand. "I can't stand waiting any more. Let's find out."

They plowed across hard flat ground through tall yielding grass towards the dancing lights that floated in the darkness as if hung from thin strands of thread. Jake and Lisa felt drawn towards the bright specks like moths to a flame.

Lisa stopped abruptly. "I think I hear something. Listen."

"Wait," Jake said, "I think I hear it too." Fright and bewilderment filled his words. "It sounds like synthesized computer music!" he said in amazement.

"I think you're right." She pulled his hand and they inched forward. "It sounds like circus music. Almost like an organ or a calliope."

Jake crouched down. "Better stay low until we know what we're up against."

They leaned forward and half crawled, half walked through the tall grass. Music pounded in their ears . . . a simple, repetitive circus melody that bellowed from a enormous calliope.

Jake suddenly dropped to the ground. "The grass stops here!" He cautiously parted the final strands. A thin layer of brightly lit sawdust covered the ground ahead. Jake looked up. The lights that had appeared from a distance to be dancing in space rested majestically on the peaks of a gigantic black canvas circus tent.

He pulled Lisa to his side and they stared open-mouthed at a small wooden stage that was illuminated by a red spotlight at the front of the tent. A canvas flap parted and a short, fat man waddled slowly into the spot's red beam.

Strands of black hair, combed upwards on both sides of his large head, thinly disguised the fat man's bald, shiny scalp. Beady, pinpoint eyes, hidden within folds of pale skin, mirrored the red light. His short, snout-like nose was lost in the soft flesh of his face.

"I don't believe it." Jake rubbed his eyes. "This can't be real."

The man wore a purple and orange plaid sports coat, lavender ruffled shirt, and a black string necktie. The wide cuffs of his green pants fell loosely over purple slippers.



"Jake, he looks comical"—she shivered—"and sinister at the same time."

"Shsssh," Jake hissed. "Let's see what he does."

He clutched a thin bamboo cane in his fat, pudgy fingers and swung it in a sweeping motion as he began to speak.

"Lay-a-dees and gentlemen." He clearly enunciated each syllable. "Step right up. Step . . . right . . . up." He paused and pointed the cane directly at Jake and Lisa. "Yes, you! The show is about to begin!"

"How can he possibly see us?" The thought was frightening, and Lisa buried herself closer to the ground.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen"—he swung the cane in a wide arc—"this is the greatest show in the universe. A Spectacle beyond comparison. A delight for your tired eyes, a delectable treat for your palate, music to your ears, ecstasy to your senses! So"—gleaming white horse teeth spread across his face as he smiled—"don't be shy, and please don't hesitate; this is the chance of a lifetime!"

"Yes, folks, hidden within this majestic tent lie all the mysteries of the Universe. The many questions." He lowered his voice. "The many answers."

He shouted, "The beautiful! The grotesque! They all abide within these hallowed walls of canvas. And the price?" He seemed to savor the feel of his words. "Ahh." He smiled at them. "The price is well within your means."

He pointed the cane directly at them. "No use trying to hide. Step up, come closer." He laughed. "Find the Oracle. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"He's got us pegged, Lisa. Whatever his game is, we'll just have to pretend to go along."

They slowly rose and walked hand-in-hand to the base of the stage. Jake nervously fixed the gun on the fat man.

"Put that silly thing away, young man. I think you'll find that heroics are quite unnecessary. After all, you are here to learn, not to destroy."

"Step a little closer. Look at my ring." He thrust his pudgy hand forward. Light bounced off a ring set with an oversized ruby, streaking their faces with dancing fingers of red.

"Look closer, closer!" His voice became a whisper. "As you look into the depths of my ring, you become sleepy. Tired and sleepy, so tired and sleepy." He inched forward, knelt in front of them, and twisted the ring slowly before their eyes. "You are falling into the ruby. Falling deeper and deeper into the heart of the stone. As you fall, you become sleepy. Tired and sleepy. You fall deeper and deeper. You become sleepy, so sleepy." His voice was a droning monotone.

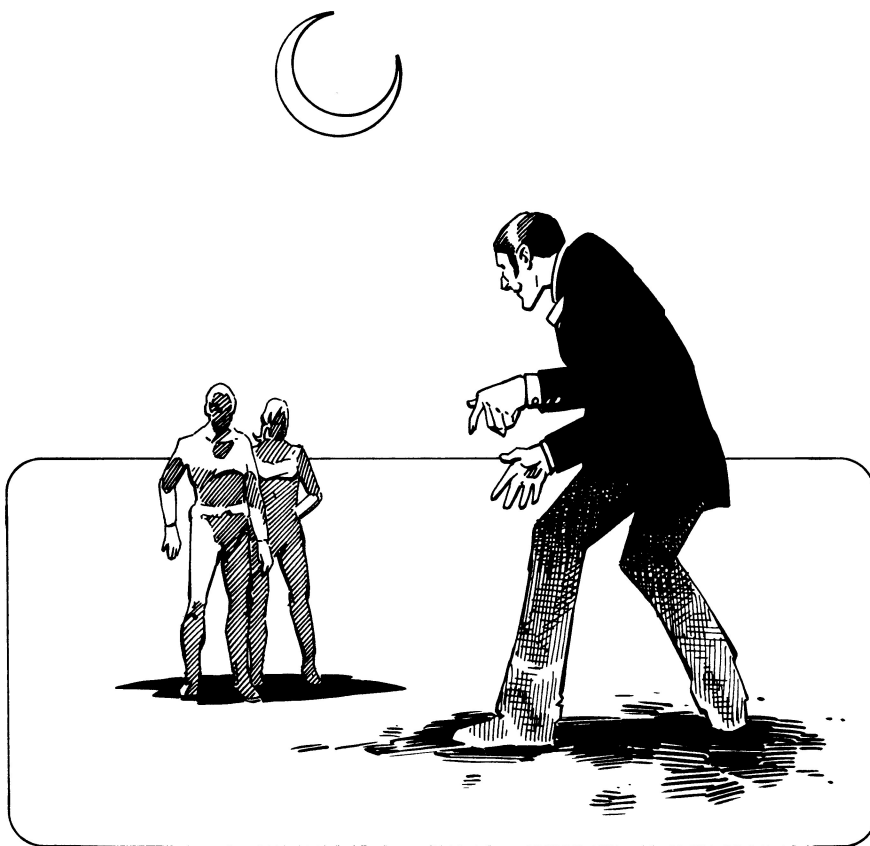
Jake and Lisa's eyes were glazed; their faces became expressionless and slack. Jake watched as his right hand slid his gun back into its holster. He felt like a bystander . . . out of control. "No, stop," he commanded. But the hand continued its movement, releasing the gun into the holster, then falling limply to his side.

The fat man leaned closer. His hot, foul breath whispered in their faces; his beady eyes held them in a trance. "Good," he whispered, "very good. You hear only my voice. Only my voice." He smiled. "You will hear only my voice. Listen to my voice and obey."

He deftly eased his bulk from the stage and stood next to them. "Welcome, children. Welcome to Quest.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ephraim Letharge. Ephraim Letharge. Listen." He paused and slowly waved his hand in front of their unblinking eyes. "Good. Very good, children. You are about to embark on a journey of discovery. A stroll through the sideshows of eternity. Listen, look, and above all, learn. For at the end of our little show, you will be asked"—he paused—"The Question."

Letharge turned and pointed his cane towards a large canvas flap. The folds pulled back to form an arch. A skinny, dissipated man with oily, slick black hair and a thin, curled moustache stood in the center of the portal. "Come here, Crump." Letharge motioned with his cane. "Welcome our guests."



The thin man shuffled forward, turning his head furtively from left to right, eyes fixed at the ground. He stopped at Letharge's side and smiled at Jake and Lisa. "This is Emmanuel Crump, my erstwhile

assistant and confidant. I sometimes call him El Caro, 'the precious one.' Feel free to address him as you please."

Jake and Lisa didn't move . . . couldn't move. "Can't move! Damn it, I can't move!" Jake thought. "I can see, I can hear, why can't I . . ." Letharge's voice filled his mind, blotting out his own thoughts. He felt it as a physical force that tugged at his consciousness. He fought against its presence, trying to regurgitate Letharge from his mind.

"El Caro will guide you." Letharge's booming voice flooded his mind. "Listen to him; he sometimes actually makes sense." Letharge laughed. "Well, enough dilly dallying." He raised his voice to a shout. "Let the show begin!" The calliope blasted a loud carnival tune. "Lead on, oh great Crump!"

The short man coyly crooked his head up and examined Jake and Lisa from beneath thick black eyebrows. His mouth curled into a thin smile. He twisted the thin ends of his waxed moustache and hissed, "Follow me," then turned and walked slowly into the large tent.

Letharge pulled himself up on the stage and sat, swinging his fat legs back and forth in time to the music. A smile beamed across his face as Jake and Lisa followed El Caro into the tent like two puppets.

* * * * *

The interior of the tent was dimly lit. The black canvas absorbed most of the light thrown from kerosene lanterns that hung from nails embedded in tarred poles.

Crump lead them through a maze of winding canvas passageways, turning to check their progress. He stopped and swung a small patch of canvas aside and drew them forward with a crooked motion of his index finger.

He twisted his head and looked up into their blank eyes. He rubbed his hands together and cackled. "So, my dearies, Letharge has hypnotized you." He coughed, a shallow muffled cough. "It's for your own good, you know." Dribble seeped down his chin. "What you are about to see and experience is much easier when in a trance. Your subconscious will absorb . . . learn." He cackled, then bent over and coughed, holding his fist to his mouth. He cleared his throat. "Consciousness distorts the truth."

He stood back, held the flap open with one hand, bent in a mock bow, then swept his arm forward and ushered them in.

A dimly lit cage spread across the width of the room. The outline of a humanoid figure skittered back to a dark corner of the cell and wrapped its thin arms about itself. Crump walked to the bars and motioned Jake and Lisa forward. They shuffled ahead and stopped in front of the cage.

"Look at it. Just look at that poor creature." El Caro ran his long fingernails across the thick bars. "See how it huddles, afraid . . . and

of what? The sound of my nails against the cage?" He turned, faced them, and smiled. "No, I think not." He paused. "Look closer. Do you notice anything unusual?" He laughed. "Of course not! How could you? It has two arms, two legs, a humanoid torso like yours, and . . . one head!"

His eyes opened wide. "But looks can be deceiving." He stared directly at Jake and whispered. "It's a Barthinian." He raised his voice. "You don't seem to understand. A Barthinian!" he shouted.

He lowered his voice to a hissing whisper. "Barthinia is the land of the two-headed." He turned and looked through the bars at the huddled figure.

"On Barthinia, he is a freak. An outcast!" He looked up at Lisa. "And to his eyes, we are one-headed freaks!" Crump turned and brushed his fingernails across the bars. "So, he huddles in the corner of his cell afraid," he hissed, "of himself."

El Caro leaned back. His body shook with laughter. "Amazing, isn't it?" He laughed. "He was exiled when he couldn't convince his countrymen that one head is better than two!" He doubled over in a fit of laughter that terminated in a racking cough.

A tear formed at the corner of Lisa's eye.

Crump looked into her glistening eyes. His voice became uncharacteristically compassionate. "Don't let emotion interfere with logic," he said. "Reality is only an illusion." He spun around and lifted his arms above his head, then drew them down in a gentle, waving motion. The bars and Barthinian slowly dissolved into a swirl of liquid colors as he shook and lowered his hands.

The area in front of them became black . . . empty. The dim light from a kerosene lantern played across Crump's thin features, accentuating the movement of his long fingers. He turned his palms over and, as he slowly raised both hands, a thin line of light grew evenly upwards from the floor in front of them. The blackness lifted like a curtain, exposing a swirling, ebbing light that danced brilliantly before their eyes.

"Watch closely. Your next lesson is about to appear." As he spoke, the outline of a wizened man sitting crosslegged on the floor materialized in the center of the room. The shape blurred, then popped alive.

The man's hands were resting on his lap, pressed together palm to palm, fingers pointing up. Brown, sore-covered, emaciated arms poked out from beneath the billowing folds of a yellow sarong. His bald head was bent forward, rocking slowly in time to his softly whispered chant. Frayed thatch sandals clung loosely to his grime-covered feet. Flies buzzed about his body, landing unmolested, apparently unnoticed, wherever they pleased.

Crump circled the meditating figure. "Yes, Lisa. Yes Jake. This is the Saint."

He stooped and looked down at the Saint's shaved head. "There is a lesson to be learned"—he paused to brush a fly from his face—"if you look close enough." He walked back and stood in front of Jake and Lisa. "This wise man who squats before you has taken the just path. He"—Crump smiled coyly—"has always done the right thing. Or so he thinks." Crump laughed. "And"—he pointed a bony finger towards the swaying figure—"this is his just reward!"

"I want to scream." The thought flashed through Lisa's mind. "Please let me scream. The smell, the filth . . ." She wanted desperately to run . . . escape from her nightmare, but she was held in place by El Caro's greedy dark eyes.

As if shying away from her thoughts, El Caro pulled a gold watch from his side pocket and flicked the case open. "Time is running short." He coughed. "Time flies when you're having fun." He smiled and slapped the bald man's head, squashing an unlucky fly. The Saint didn't move. "Time. A very illusive commodity . . . very malleable, if you know how to shape it. But enough of that. That comes later. That is the ultimate lesson, but now the show must continue," he smirked, "we don't have much time.

"Stand back." He pushed them gently. "This act requires a little more room." He turned and motioned with his hands. A new scene materialized. The room expanded to auditorium size. They stood at its rear behind rows of empty, velvet-covered chairs that sloped down to a broad, well-lit wooden stage. A silver sign shimmered, "MAGIC TONIGHT," in front of a pleated, purple velvet curtain above the stage.

The curtain slowly opened and Ephraim Lethage waddled forward like an elephant seal to center stage and bowed.

Crump clapped halfheartedly, then leaned forward, bracing himself with both hands against the back of a chair.

"Magic!" A thin, white-tipped cane replaced Lethage's curved bamboo. A high collared, red-lined cape fell loosely from his shoulders. "Magic! The art of prestidigitation!" He swung the cane in a wide arc . . . it vanished. "Nothing up my sleeves." He waddled forward, pulling up the sleeves of his plaid jacket. "Or is there?" His face beamed in a horsetooth smile. His black, beady eyes glimmered.

"Now you see it, now you don't." He reached into a side pocket and pulled out a deck of cards. With a sweeping motion of his fat arm, he tossed the cards above his head. Each card fluttered like a bird, taking on a life of its own before vanishing in a puff of smoke as it fell to the stage.

He fanned his cape open like a gigantic bird spreading his wings, then pulled it forward, wrapping his bulky torso in a black cocoon. "Now you see it!" he shouted as he began to twirl. He spun slowly at first, then built up speed until his shape spun into a black blur. Red smoke billowed from the base of the spinning figure engulfing it, hiding



it from view. Blinding white light exploded from its center, followed by a sharp, thunderous clap that shook the auditorium.

The stage was deserted and still.

Suddenly, Letharge's voice boomed from the silence. "Business ethics!" He laughed. "Now you see it, now you don't!" His laugh filled the room, then slowly decreased in volume as it faded away.

Crump waved his hands and the auditorium melted into a swirl of pulsing colors.

"When is this insanity going to end?" Jake tried to shake the madness from his mind. "Alice in Wonderland," he thought, but didn't know why.

El Caro continued to narrate as three acts flickered past their eyes like an old-time lantern show.

"The horse-headed Samaritan," El Caro whispered into Jake's ear, "fixes the race." The scene changed again and El Caro shouted, "The blank-faced woman . . . Ignorance is bliss! And finally, children, the slobbering Greek . . . enough said."

Crump raised his hands above his head. "The moment of illusive truth." Three canvas doors appeared before them as he spoke. "It's time to bring you back to reality. Your lesson is complete." He faced Lisa and brought his thin hands down in front of her face. He sharply snapped his fingers and shouted, "Awake!"

She shook her head and blinked.

Crump moved to Jake. "Now for the boy." He snapped his fingers.

"What?" Jake rubbed his eyes. "Where are we?" He looked at Crump, at the three canvas doors, then at Lisa. "Lisa, are you all right?"

"I . . ." Her face was pale. "I don't know. The last I remember, we were on the ship." She gasped. "Then you dematerialized!" She reached for his hand. "The rest is a blur."

Jake looked at the small man. "Who are you? . . . Wait . . . You look familiar. I think." He paused. "I think I know your face. You're"—he struggled with the words—"El Caro." Not quite sure, he asked, "Aren't you?"

Crump laughed. "Right so far, young man. Let's see how right you are when faced with a real mystery." He turned and pointed towards the three canvas flaps. "The Oracle waits behind one of these three portals. Which one will it be?" he hissed. "Will it be the door to the left? The easy path?" He turned and smiled at Lisa. "The path of cheats," he whispered.

"Or"—he pointed to the rightmost flap—"the arduous road. The path of heroes?" He smiled at Jake. "Or, are heroes only fools?"

He walked to the center flap and ran his hand across the canvas. "Or, the road of moderation?"

El Caro stepped back. "I know which road I'm going to take. No question in my mind! I hope your decision will be as easy." He bowed

slightly. "Maybe we'll meet on the other side, as they say. Be seeing you!" He quickly turned and melted through the flap at the left.

"Jake, I'm not sure I want to go on with this." She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. "Can't we go back to the ship and forget the whole thing?"

"That sounds like a good idea. I'll contact CLIDE." He spoke into the communicator. "CLIDE, this is Jake, do you read me?" There was no answer. "CLIDE? CLIDE? Come in. This is Jake, CLIDE, do you read?"

He twisted the small knobs on the face of the device. "Nothing. Nothing!" He turned towards Lisa. "What now?"

"I, I don't know." Her eyes frantically shifted from one door to the next. "This was my brilliant idea." She lowered her gaze to the floor. "I'm the one who wanted to go back in time . . ."

"Stop tormenting yourself. Let's just go for it." He looked at her and smiled. "Pick a door."

She looked from one flap to the next. "The easy way . . . the way of moderation . . . the road of heroes. Jake, I can't do it!" Anger and frustration filled her voice. "I can't make up my mind; they all seem right."

"Well"—Jake rolled his eyes up—"that little creep, El Caro, went through the door to the left. There's no way I'm going to follow him. That only leaves us two choices, moderation and heroics, and I don't feel especially brave right now. How about the middle door?"

"Okay, but let's walk through together, Jake."

"Hold my hand." They stood before the center flap. Lisa dug her fingernails into the palm of his hand. "Easy," he said, simulating courage. "I'm going to count from three to zero. On zero, we step through."

"Three . . . two . . . one . . ." he squeezed her hand. "Zero," and they stepped forward into the clean, brisk air of an autumn night.

"Jake, look up!" He twisted his head and looked at the clear night sky. "Do you see those stars?" She released her grip and pointed at the sky. "That's the Big Dipper! Look at it, Jake, see the handle, and the ladle at its end." She pointed towards the horizon. "And over there," she said excitedly, "that's the North Star. And there's Orion, and . . . Jake, we're back on Earth!"

He turned around slowly. "This is amaz . . ." The sentence was left unfinished. "Oh, no," he said. "Turn around, Lisa. We're still on Quest." They stared in disbelief at the large black circus tent.

Lisa began to cry. "It's not fair. That was cruel. They're playing with us. Oh, Jake, how did we get ourselves into this mess?"

He looked forlornly at the large tent. "Oh, no. Look at that, Lisa." He pointed at the peaks of canvas. Thousands of strands of thread shot from the tent, upwards into space. Each thread attached to a star.

Suddenly, the ground trembled and convulsed. Lisa screamed. They spun around. Jake pulled out his pistol.

A huge head filled the sky. Its gigantic, menacing eyes glowed bright gold. Ram's horns curved back from its forehead. Its bearded face and scowling mouth glared with a fierce, intense anger.

The head roared at them with the force of a thousand lions, blasting a green mist from its gaping mouth. The force tossed Jake and Lisa to the ground.

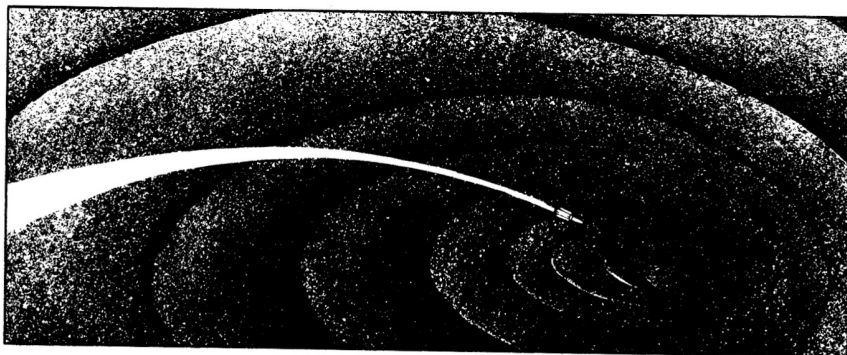
"Oracle!" the head shouted. "Oracle!" The ground shook. Flashes of lightning crackled across the black sky. "Yes, you've found him. And here is your answer!"

He roared again, explosively spitting thousands of multicolored hand-sized symbols at Jake and Lisa. Green crosses, blue globes of liquid, yellow exclamation points, black 'O's; wild dancing, violent, twisted shapes that rained on them.

Jake held his arm across his face. Lisa turned from the onslaught and covered her eyes.

≡≡≡ CHAPTER 6 ≡≡≡

CORRIDOR



Jake spasmodically clenched and unclenched his right fist. His brown eyes held the glazed look of a man who has reached into his soul and dredged up hell.

His uniform was in tatters. Strips of blue cloth fluttered from his body, blown astray by the softly humming air conditioner. His hair was a jumbled mess that hung forwards, partially hiding his gaunt, white face.

She spoke slowly. "Jake," she whispered. "Jake, it's all over. We're safe now." She forced her voice to be soothing, willing her words to reach out and calm him.

She walked behind him and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Jake, you've got to sit down. You've got to rest." She applied gentle downward pressure and his legs caved in as he collapsed into the control chair.

Lisa pushed an orange button on the console. "CLIDE. Are you still with us?"

CLIDE's loud metallic "Yes," startled and reassured her at the same time.

"Then we are among the living," she said. "This isn't another illusion. I've had my fill of illusions." She sat in her chair and worriedly brushed the hair back from her face. "CLIDE, Jake's in a bad way. You should have seen it, it was horrible. Those things flying at him. That, that face, that monster . . ."

She turned and looked at Jake's slumped body. His eyes were fixed ahead, looking at nothing. "We've got to do something, CLIDE." Her voice was broken and unsure. "You've got to help him!"

She had barely finished speaking when a book-sized door on the console slid open. A gleaming, metallic arm emerged, holding a cylindrical object between its two pincer fingers. The mechanical arm unfolded with whirling precision and headed for Jake's right arm. It stopped next to his shoulder, then inched forwards towards his tattered shirt.

"What is it?" Lisa's body went stiff. "CLIDE, what are you doing to him?"

"Just a mild sedative, Lisa. My analysis indicates a need for rest."

She heard a faint whoosh of air escape from the cylinder as it pressed against his arm. Then, with a quick, smooth action, the arm folded upon itself and retreated into the console.

Seconds later, Jake's head slumped forward. His chin rested on his chest, his frightening eyes finally closed in motionless sleep. Lisa picked up his feet and rested them on the console, then leaned his head back, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. "CLIDE, dim the lights, will you?"

Within seconds, the control room was illuminated solely by the small red and green light thrown from the control panel and screens.

Lisa drew deep, measured breaths, fighting a fear that welled up from within the pit of her stomach.

"CLIDE, is he going to make it?" She looked at the blinking console lights as if they held some magical powers.

"CLIDE, answer me!" Five silent seconds passed, seeming an eternity. She closed her fists, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hands. "CLIDE," she shouted, "answer me! I demand to be answered!"

"Paleeze." CLIDE sounded indignant. "I'm trying to calculate."

"You, you pile of junk!" She frantically pounded the top of the console. "Calculate," she screamed, "I ask you a simple question, and you . . . you want to calculate?" She looked at Jake and her lips pulled back from her teeth. "Can't you see what's happening? He, he's lost, it's, it's"—her voice lowered—"it's all over. Dumb machine. Why do I expect you to understand? All you can do is CAL-CU-LATE!"

Lisa shook her head and was about to continue when CLIDE hushed her. "Lisa, your shouting is making it very difficult to decipher."

"What? Decipher?"

"He's mumbling a series of numbers. Keeps repeating them in convoluted sequences. Am attempting decipher."

Lisa bent and put her ear close to his mouth. Jake was muttering incoherently.

"Seflent . . . cornates . . . zzro, slix . . .," then, he rattled off a series of words in rapid fire. "Sstr sect sven entr plz minuz fivddy daggers apex." He repeated this sequence three times and lapsed into silence.

Lisa lifted her head. "What does it mean, CLIDE? What is he trying to say? It doesn't make any sense."

"Please stand by."

CLIDE worked in silence. No whirling gears, no mechanical storage, just the efficient flip flop of millions of living DNA multisection cells . . . The wait was maddening. "CLIDE! Please!"

"One moment, Lisa. Almost there . . . Ahh . . . it correlates. Allow me to explain."

She was breathless. "Please do."

"Jake's mumblings have been confirmed to be a complex set of multi-dimensional formulae that match a precise star map coordinate. A star map coordinate defined by spatial relationships relating to time, space, mass, acceleration, and absolute velocity."

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

"I don't know, Lisa. I do know that it is possible to travel to and through, so to speak, these coordinates."

"What happened?" Jake jerked his head up and looked at Lisa. "How did we get here?" He held his hands in front of his face, ready to fend off any flying object.

Lisa spun around. "Jake! Jake! You're all right!" She looked into his tired eyes and smiled. "I thought you were lost to us. I thought . . . oh, who cares what I thought? You're back and that's all that really matters."

"But . . ." He lowered his hands, realizing that he was sitting in a comfortable and familiar control room. ". . . it doesn't seem possible. One minute, I was being pelted by flying symbols from that, that giant head, and now, well, now I'm here. What happened in between? Where's Quest? Did I dream it, or what?"

"It wasn't a dream, Jake, I can vouch for that. I was standing behind you while that thing was going berserk down there. The next thing I knew, I was up here watching you standing by the screen with a blank, comatose look in your eyes. Jake, I was more frightened by that look than anything that happened on Quest. I was afraid that you had drawn into yourself, afraid you'd never pull out."

Lisa slid into her chair. "And then," she continued, "CLIDE heard you talking in your sleep. You were rattling off a series of numbers and coordinates which he claims correspond to a special multi-dimensional point in space . . . a place that you can go through, as he put it."

"What's that?" Jake sat up excitedly. "Don't you see what this

means? O.K., let's sort it out." Lisa leaned forwards, placing her elbow on the console and resting her chin in the palm of her hand.

"The symbols that the giant head was flinging at me . . . he must have been planting those coordinates in my mind via those symbols. Don't you see," he said excitedly, "that giant head was the Oracle. He has given us the key . . . the way back into the past!" He turned towards the console. "CLIDE, set a course to those coordinates. Head there without delay and advise our estimated time of arrival."

The ship shuddered as the nuclear reactors discharged a blast of energy that propelled the ship forwards, and shoved Jake and Lisa back into their contoured chairs.

"E.T.A. at 1800 hours. Precisely 10 hours from now."

* * * * *

Jake slept well, then took a hot shower before returning to the bridge. Only minutes remained before they would reach the coordinates.

He sauntered to the control panel, flicked a few switches, and looked at an image forming on the video screen. A swirling, phosphorescent cloud, much like the funnel of a cosmic tornado, grew in size as they sped towards its center. He pressed a green, flush-mounted button and the solitary word, "ANALYZE," appeared above the swirling mass.

"CLIDE!" He impatiently pressed the green button. "Where's the analysis? Display it, and that's an order!" Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. "CA . . . LIED!" he yelled.

"Sorry, sir." CLIDE almost sounded embarrassed as he added, "There is no data to analyze. By all indications, that image does not exist."

"What do you mean, doesn't exist? Damn it, CLIDE, stop talking in riddles!"

"Sir," CLIDE continued humbly, "that image is not obeying the natural laws of physics. My mass detectors indicate zero mass; my radiation detection equipment indicates zero radiation at all frequencies, including light."

"That doesn't make sense. CLIDE, that just doesn't compute. How can I see it, if it doesn't exist? We've got to have the answer, and fast. The cloud is about to engulf this ship!"

"The only possibility, sir, if I may be allowed to hypothesize . . ."

"Out with it, CLIDE!"

"Well, sir, that cloud may be occurring in a different dimension, at a different time. Or, sir, it may not be there at all."

"A lot of help you are! Damn." Jake slammed his palm onto the green button. "Where's Lisa? She's probably putting on makeup, or tidying up her room!"

"No such luck, Jake." He spun around. "I've been standing here watching you make a fool of yourself for the past five minutes."

She looked up the bright, swirling cloud that now filled the entire

screen. A glazed, religious expression crossed her face. "Jake, we're being drawn into a bottomless pit! Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Pray." He slumped into his chair and tried to regain his composure by taking deep, even breaths.

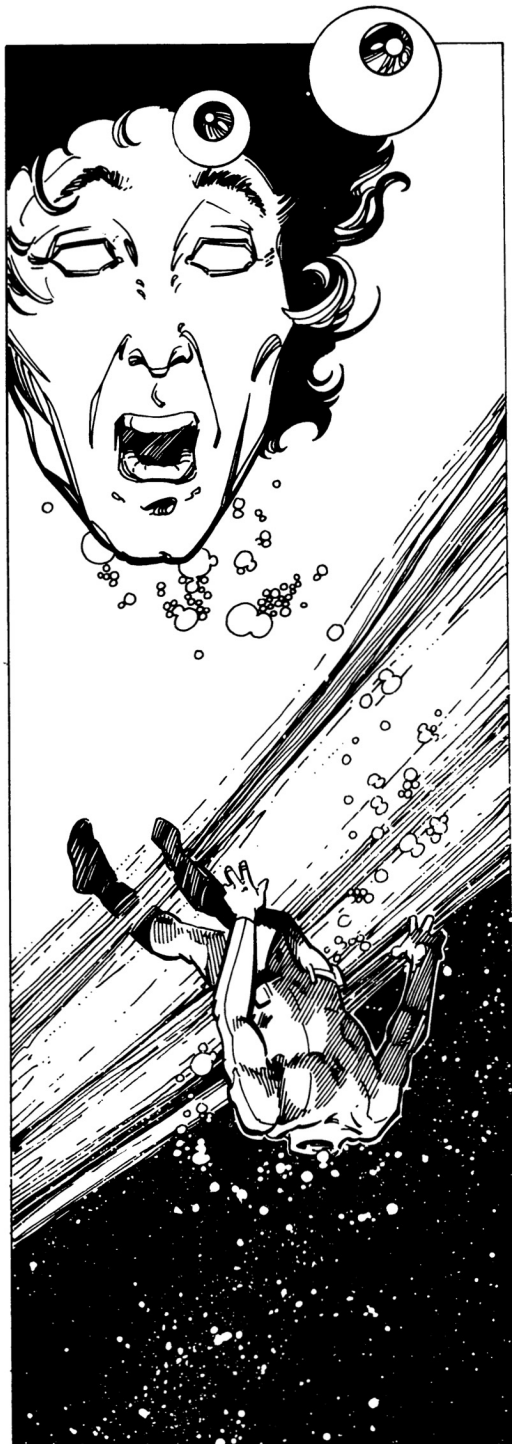
She felt her way into her chair, never turning from the screen and the apparition that was threatening to engulf their small world.

Suddenly, strange things began to happen. First, the flat screen started to oscillate, growing in size as it bent and curled around itself. Then the walls of the control room buckled in, scattering trays of data files across the console. Then the control panel lights flickered, brightened, and exploded, popping like a string of Chinese firecrackers.

Jake watched his legs bend upwards, slicing through his stomach like a ghost walking through a wall. Suddenly, he was flipped upside down, or at least his head was, or at least he thought it was, and his eyes seemed to be floating outside of his body. "Strange," he thought.

He tried to blink, but found that he didn't have eyelids. At least not above his eyes. It was no use; he was falling to pieces, and strangely enough he thought it was kind of "neat." "Neato!" he yelled, but his mouth wasn't connected to anything, and he watched his disjointed lips mouthing the words as they flapped about the room. "Neato! Neato! Neato!"

The last semi-coherent thought he had was something to the effect that, loose lips sink



ships. "Where did that one come from?" he thought, "and where is it going?"

Then a horrible thing occurred. The screen dissolved—just turned to liquid and plopped to the floor. In its place was—well, in its place was nothing. Jake's disoriented mind tried to grasp the situation and put it into words so he could watch his mouth flap around some more. "Nothing is kind of like everything," he thought, "and how can I describe that?" He gave up the effort. "Neato!"

Lisa wasn't there. Not in one piece, anyhow. She was everywhere, and nowhere at the same time, but she was having fun, or so she thought . . . she thought. "Weird," was her primary thought, "really weird," and she started giggling. "Wow!" was her next lucid thought, before her left ear spun through her nose and she started laughing.

CLIDE wasn't affected at all. It wasn't until he tried to talk that he realized something might be slightly out of balance. "Snergk trauuug snaflicky srnorzad, sqeeeeeeek, grummmfff."

Suddenly, a bright white flash blinded Jake's unprotected eyes and the room reverberated to the sound of grotesque laughter. The gigantic face of the Oracle filled the room. His blank, yellow eyes gleamed, ram's horns protruded from the side of his head, and green smoke poured from his downturned mouth. Jake's foot whisked through the face's thin nose, and his lips started to flap, "Neato!" below the Oracle's unkempt beard.

"This is adding insult to injury!" The thought flashed through what was left of Jake's fractioned mind, and his lips flapped frantically.

The room shook violently as the Oracle shouted, "CORRIDOR OF TIME!" He repeated slowly with more force, "COR . . . AHH . . . DOOR!" and the ship shattered into millions of microscopic splinters.

* * * * *

Jake blinked. His lids closed over his eyes. "I have eyelids!" he thought. He looked down at his body, relieved to find it in one piece. "Thigh bone's connected to da hip bone . . ." The song raced through his mind. He felt great! He flexed his fingers and tapped his toes as the song wandered through his head. Then he bravely started singing, elated to hear the sound of his voice. "Hip bone's connected to the backbone . . ."

Lisa wasn't impressed. "Shut it up!"

"Huh?" He was startled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. Shut it up," she repeated, "I have a splitting headache."

"Oh," he said, and began examining his fingernails. "They're too long," he thought.

"Jake, do you have any idea what I've just been though?" She sounded disgusted. "Do you realize how I feel? Well, do you or don't you? Or don't you care?"

"Huh," he said, and lifted his head.

"Jake, I've got to tell you that this trip hasn't exactly been a picnic. Do you think it's been easy?"

"What?" He sounded as if in a fog.

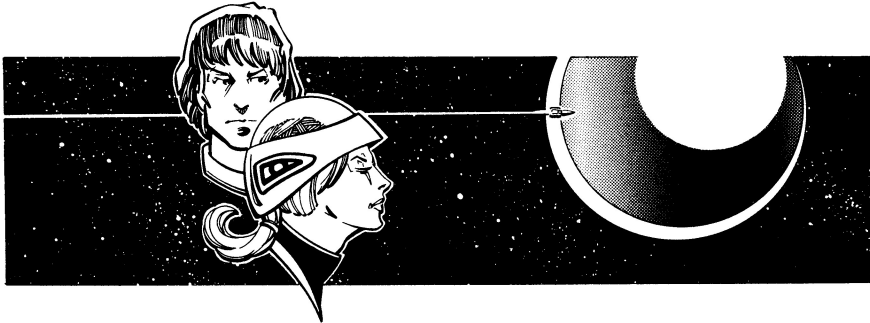
"Snap out of it!" she shouted.

"Why?"

"Because, although you don't deserve it, and although your hip bones are not in fact connected to your backbone, this trip is about to end. And, I'm not ashamed to say, not a moment too soon. Do you understand that?"

He shot up from his chair. "No," he answered, his face turning red, "what's wrong with my singing? What's wrong with my being happy? Huh?"

She pursed her lips and blew out a stream of air. "Jake, I explained that I had a headache, right?" She went on without waiting for his answer, "and I also said that this trip's about to end. Aren't you interested in . . . in anything?"



"Yes," he said, "the latter, I am most definitely interested in the latter. I want to make this perfectly clear, I am interested in the latter, and not the former. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think I understand perfectly well. During this entire trip, you've been more interested in CLIDE, of all things, than me. Now, you don't even care about my headache. All you seem to care about is . . . what do you care about?" She was angry. Her face hardened into a determined expression.

"Well, ahh . . ."

"Stop stammering, Jake. Get it out!"

"Well, damn it!" He slammed his fist into his palm. "I have a hard time expressing my feelings, that's all. Is that so hard to understand?"

"No. But what are your feelings, and where have they been hiding?"

"You don't have to get sarcastic!" He couldn't look at her, so he examined his ripped shoes. "Yes, I'll admit it. I do care about you . . . and your headache. But," he stammered, "I've got responsibilities. I've got to worry about the mission and such." He looked up bravely.

"I'm glad that you didn't ask about the latter, about this trip coming to an end. If you had, I would have . . . would have strangled you!"

"What about the trip coming to an end?" he asked innocently, trying to sneak the question in.

"I give up. I absolutely give up." She sunk in her chair. "Let me tell you the facts. The facts are all you seem to care about."

"But, Lisa . . ."

"Don't 'But, Lisa' me! While you were snoozing, I was working. I've been in contact with Earth. We'll be landing in less than an hour." She looked ready to cry. "I should be happy, but I'm having mixed feelings about leaving . . . you, and . . . the trip, if you can understand that?"

"It's gone by so fast. We've gone through so much together and I keep on thinking"—she looked down at her hands—"I keep thinking that we should have grown much, much closer than we have. Do you understand, Jake?"

He sat down in his chair. "You mean that it's all over. Don't you?" he said, deeply depressed.

"It doesn't have to be," she said tentatively.

He stood, walked slowly to her side, and did something he never thought he would ever do. He put his hands below her chin, bent down, and kissed her, with feeling.

"We're a team, Lisa." He straightened up and smiled. "It's just beginning."

"Okay." She smiled, and a few moments later said, "Now let's take care of our second priority . . . our current situation."

"Sounds fair enough to me," he said enthusiastically.

Lisa pointed to the emerald globe that grew larger at their approach.

"As I was saying, while you were sleeping I received a call from Earth. It seems that we've done it, Jake. We've actually gone back in time! In fact, today is exactly three earth years from the day we left.

"They think we're some sort of heroes down there. Jake, we're the first ones to come back, and they think we're heroes."

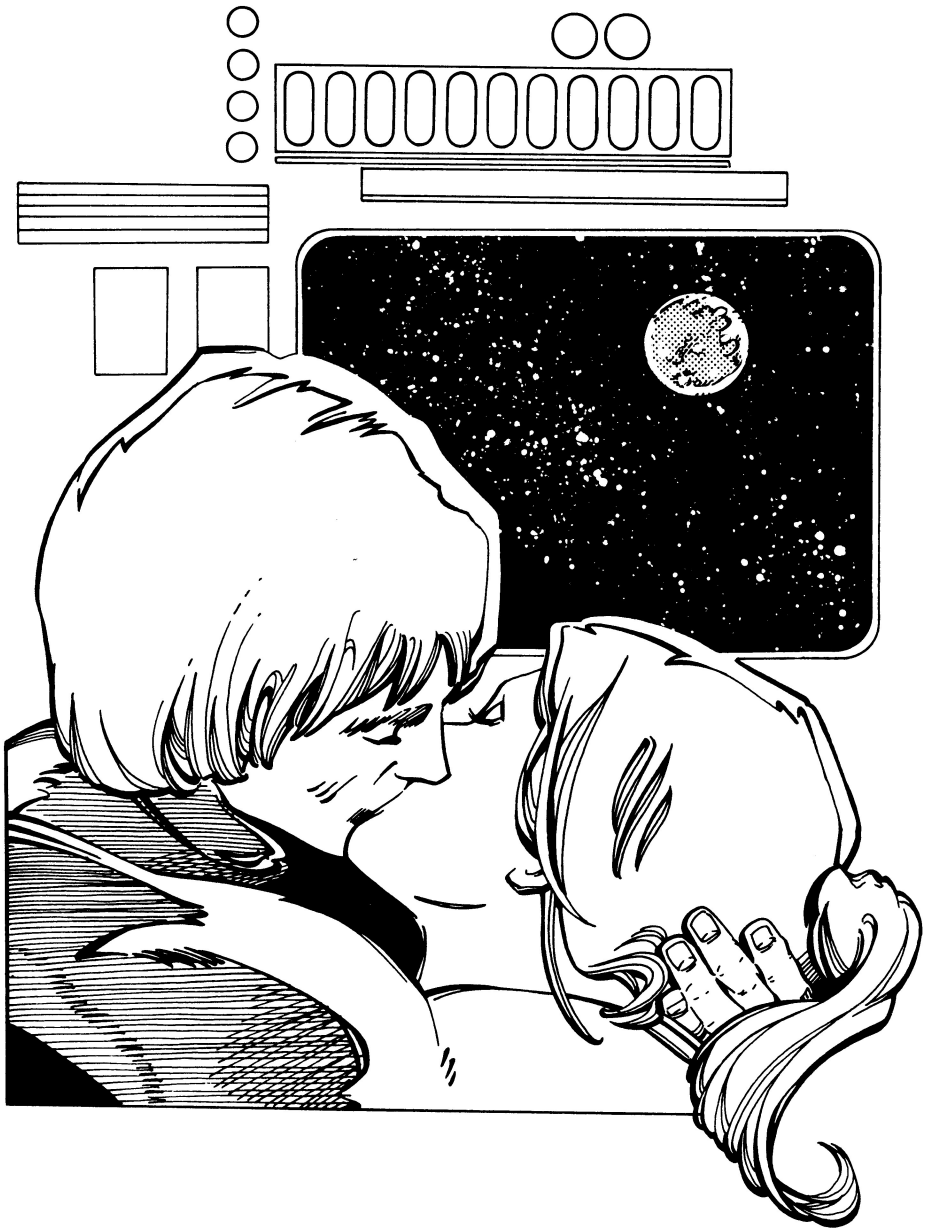
"Sure." He glanced at the video screen. "Sure, now they'll want to know all about the future and such. What are they going to think when we tell them about Palo Cosmos? Or, for that matter, when we try to describe Weomby?"

She straightened her uniform. "Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. Our first priority is to land. I can't wait to see my family, and my little sister. Three years . . . what's Sue going to look like?"

"Yeah." He joined in her enthusiasm. "And Mitzi, my sister, she's not a little girl any more. Wow! Boy, I wonder if Sergeant Burly is still at the Camp. He'll go into orbit when he sees me!"

"Lisa"—he reached across and held her hand—"let's bring this bucket down."

* * * * *



The outer hatch quietly slid open, admitting blinding sunlight into the small decompression chamber. A collapsible metal stairway whirred as it extended and touched the white concrete below.

Jake shielded his eyes with one hand and held Lisa's with the other as he squinted at a small group of civilians pressing against a low fence across the concrete field. He couldn't recognize any of the distant figures bunched together like commuters waiting for the rush-hour transport.

"What do you make of it, Lisa?" He squeezed her hand. "Why don't they come closer?"

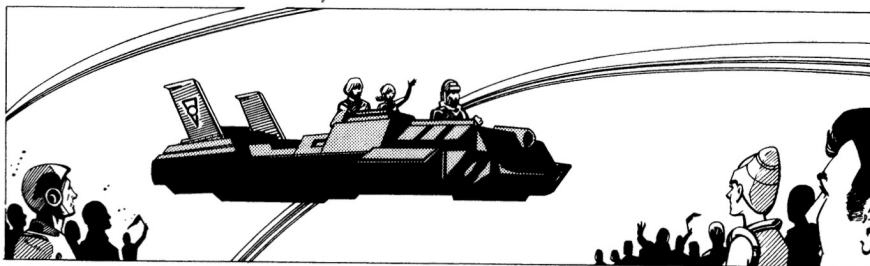
"Look." She pointed to the right of a small crowd, where a silver vehicle poked its pointed nose out of an arched hangar. "It's headed this way!"

The small four-man vehicle sped to the foot of the stairs, halted, and hovered on an invisible cushion of air. The transparent canopy split open and the driver waved up to them. "Hey, Stinger! I don't have all day," he shouted.

Jake turned to Lisa and laughed. "It's Burly! I don't believe it. Let's go!" They raced down the stairs to the side of the car.

"Burly! I never thought I'd be happy to see you. Wow!" Jake was so ecstatic that he almost felt like kissing Burly's ugly, weathered face. He smiled, then introduced Lisa.

Burly's face lit up as he beamed an approving smile. "Hop in the back," he said. Then the small craft lifted and floated slowly towards the waiting crowd.



Jake leaned forwards against the back of the front seat, trying to make out a familiar face. Lisa tugged his sleeve and pointed out the front window. "Is that your sister? That tall, dark-haired girl over there? She looks just like you."

Jake leaned forward. "Wow! That's Mitzi. Wow!" Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something frighteningly familiar . . . it made his heart stop for a moment, although he couldn't figure out why.

"Look at it, Lisa!" He pointed towards a chunk of black, cylindrical granite surrounded by workmen.

Lisa leaned forwards. "Burly, what's that thing?"

"Oh, that." Burly sounded annoyed. "That's just another statue. The Old Man said it's going to be 'a symbolic representation of peace through technology,' or something."

"But," Jake stammered, "I've seen that statue before, I know it! But . . ."

The dark memory of a dead city and dying planet clouded his joy at returning. He grasped her hand and resolutely forced the thought from his mind as the hovercraft sped towards the crowd that was cheering, "Space Knights!"

INSTRUCTIONS FOR LOADING DISKETTE FOR ALL PROGRAMS

The Space Knights diskette is designed to operate with an Atari* 800*/48K/Disk Drive Computer equipped with BASIC cartridge. To load Space Knights programs. Follow these simple steps:

1. Power up Disk Drive #1 and wait until the red *BUSY* light turns off.
2. Insert either side of the Space Knight diskette into Drive #1.
3. Turn on your computer and monitor.

Side 1: The following "Menu" will appear on your screen:

SPACE KNIGHTS
MENU I

1. MIND DEMONS (Joy Stick)
2. CORRIDOR OF TIME (Paddle)
3. IMPACT (Paddle)
4. BUG BUSTER (Joy Stick)
5. WAR ROOM (Joy Stick)
6. GAMMALON (Joy Stick)
7. RETURN TO BASIC

ENTER YOUR CHOICE

Side 2: the following "Menu" will appear on your screen:

*Indicates trademark of Atari, Inc.

SPACE KNIGHTS MENU II 1. WEOMBY (Paddle) 2. NAVIGATE 3. MYSTERY GAME 4. RETURN TO BASIC ENTER YOUR CHOICE
--

To Play Each Game

Type the number that appears to the left of the game's name. For example, to play Weomby type the number "1" and Weomby will LOAD and RUN automatically—you do not have to type RETURN after your entry.

To Return to Menu

Press SELECT after you complete a game sequence to return to the "Menu."

* * * * *

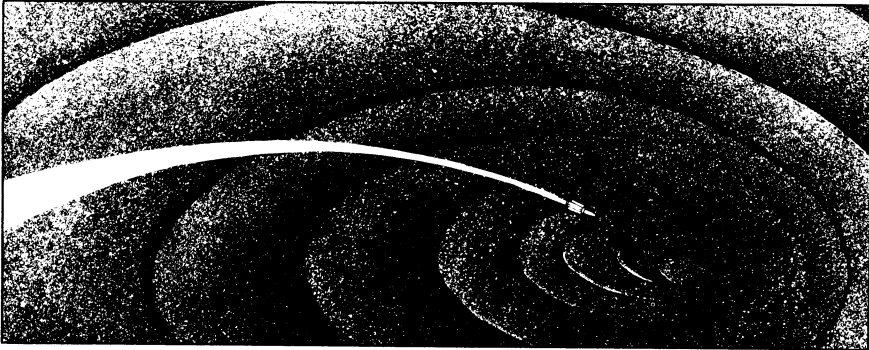
USING THE DISKETTE ON A 24K COMPUTER

Although the disk is designed to work automatically on a 48K computer, you can play the Space Knights game on a 24K computer by following these simple instructions:

Your screen will be filled with erratic lines of color after the disk boots-in.

- a. Press SYSTEM RESET
- b. Type—1 [RETURN]—to eliminate LINE 1 of the "Menu" program.
- c. Type—RUN [RETURN]—and the "Menu" will appear.
- d. Select the game you'd like to play by following the above instructions.
- e. After you press SELECT at the end of a game, your screen will again fill with erratic lines of color. Repeat steps a. through d. to play another game.

CORRIDOR OF TIME



STORY EXCERPT

Jake makes a startling discovery:

“The symbols that that giant head was flinging at me . . . he must have been planting those coordinates in my mind via those symbols. Don’t you see,” he said excitedly, “that giant head was the Oracle. He has given us the key . . . the way back into the past!” He turned towards the console.

“CLIDE, set a course to those coordinates. Head there without delay and advise our estimated time of arrival.”

The ship shuddered as the nuclear reactors discharged a blast of energy that propelled the ship forwards, and shoved Jake and Lisa back into their contoured chairs.

As they approach their destination:

Jake sauntered to the control panel, flicked a few switches, and looked at an image forming on the video screen. A swirling, phosphorescent cloud, much like the funnel of a cosmic tornado, grew in size as they sped towards its center. He pressed a green, flush-mounted button and the solitary word "ANALYZE" appeared above the swirling mass.

"CLIDE! CLIDE!" He impatiently pressed the green button. "Where's the analysis? Display it, and that's an order!" Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. "CA . . . LIED!" he yelled.

"Sorry, sir." CLIDE almost sounded embarrassed as he added, "There is no data to analyze. By all indications, the image does not exist."

The ship is pulled into the Corridor of Time:

A bright, white flash momentarily blinded Jake's unprotected eyes and the room reverberated to the sound of grotesque laughter. The gigantic face of the Oracle filled the room. His blank, yellow eyes gleamed, ram's horns protruded from the side of his head, and green smoke poured from his downturned mouth. Jake's foot whisked through the face's thin nose, and his lips started to flap, "Neato!" below the Oracle's unkempt beard.

"This is adding insult to injury!" The thought flashed through what was left of Jake's fractioned mind, and his lips flapped frantically.

The room shook violently as the Oracle shouted, "CORRIDOR OF TIME!" He repeated slowly with more force, "COR . . . AHH . . . DOOR!" and the ship shattered into millions of microscopic splinters.

* * * * *

— *PILOT YOUR CRAFT THROUGH THE* —

CORRIDOR OF TIME

This exciting time travelling game will leave you breathless as you struggle to pass through the Corridor of Time.

BE CAREFUL. If you're not, your ship could shatter into millions of microscopic splinters!

— *REACH FOR A NEW DIMENSION*
TRAVEL THROUGH —

THE CORRIDOR OF TIME

The challenge of *Corridor* is straightforward:

To guide your spaceship safely through the two ladder-like boundaries of the Corridor.

The longer your ship survives, the higher it will climb up the screen. Levels increase as it ascends, until it reaches level 10 and the game's end.

Scoring is also straightforward:

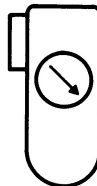
The longer you survive, the higher your final score.

— *BUT* —

The walls of the Corridor rapidly close in on your ship, threatening destruction, as it ascends.

Controlling Your Ship

1. Plug the *paddles* firmly into jack 1 at the front of the computer console.
2. Use only the *left most* paddle to control left and right motion of your ship. The other paddle is not employed in this game.
3. To help orient your paddle, turn the paddle clockwise, until it stops, and tape an indicator arrow on top as shown:



Blasting the Walls Apart

Press the red strigger button on the controller to blast the Corridor's walls apart.

Use this feature sparingly. You only have eleven (11) blasting charges.

The screen's colored boundary will alternately flash *light grey* when only one charge remains.

The screen's colored boundary will alternately flash *black* when you have expended all your blasting charges.

To Begin Play

1. Center your ship between the two ladder-like walls of the Corridor.
2. Press START.

Press START to play again.

— GOOD LUCK, TIME TRAVELLER! —

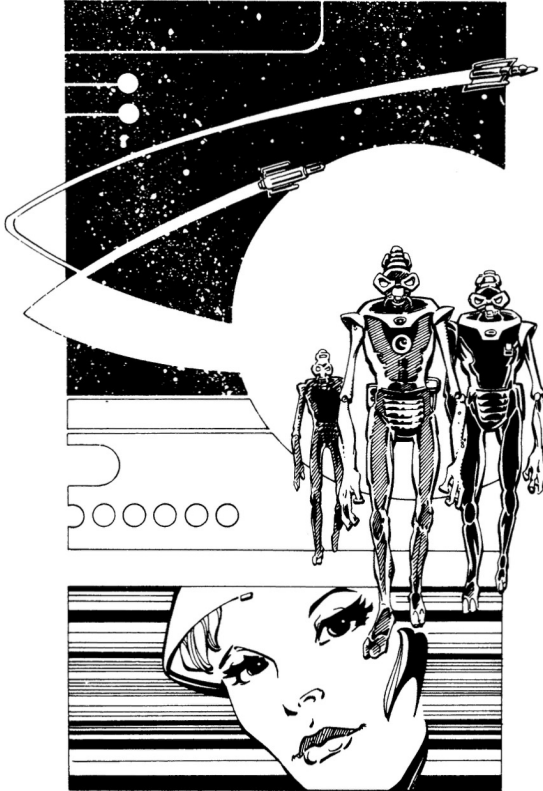
GAMMALON ENCOUNTER

STORY EXCERPT

Jake, Lisa and their computer CLIDE are being shadowed by Gammalon Pirates:

Jake punched a series of numbers into the command console and the view-screen listed the battle hardware. A green light pulsed next to each red line of text, indicating all systems GO and in full battle readiness. He punched another button and the screen showed a long-range view of their sector and a blurred view of quadrant A23 at the top of the screen.

Tension mounted as they approached the encounter, affecting even CLIDE's long-winded programming. CLIDE went into action. A string of numbers flowed across the screen.



Later:

Lisa and Jake both stared at the upper portion of the view-screen, waiting for the blur to change into recognizable shape. Jake tapped a pencil nervously on the instrument panel. Lisa waited in readiness, her finger poised before the knobs and switches of the E.W. console.

CLIDE broke the silence excitedly. "Positive I.D.! Gammalons. Three of them. Two Regnaught Fighters and one Dreadnaught. Relative bearing

360 degrees, range 500 kilometers and closing. Intercept at point ALPHA97 at 2145 hours.”

“Show it, CLIDE! Put it up on the screen!” Jake was frantic.

The screen blinked, then showed a representation of three Gammalon vessels. Superimposed red lines moved slowly towards a point in the center to indicate calculated point of contact.

Suddenly, the Gammalon vessels vanished, and the three red lines swept aimlessly across the empty screen.

Lisa’s fingers scurried across her instrument panel. “Deceptive jamming, Jake. I’m going to counter.”

— PREPARE TO BATTLE THE GAMMALONS PREPARE TO PLAY —

GAMMALON ENCOUNTER

GAMMALON ENCOUNTER pits you against three Gammalon warships in a battle to the death. First, you must defeat the Gammalon’s Electronic Warfare cloaks, then its a toe-to-toe space free-for-all.

HOW TO PLAY GAMMALON ENCOUNTER

GAMMALON ENCOUNTER is a joystick-controlled action game, with your point of view from within your spacecraft.

Before Pressing START

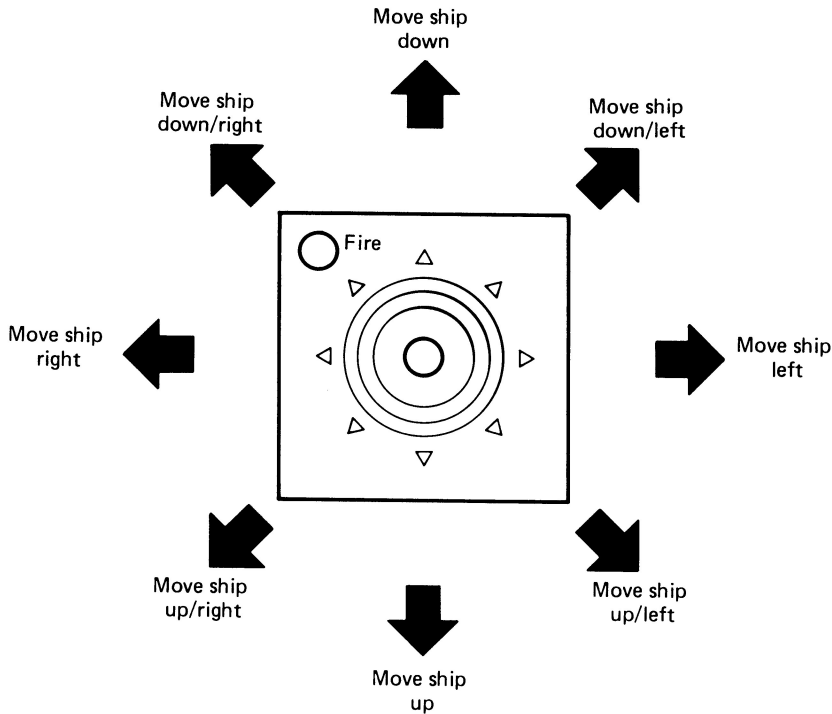
The game’s cover displays the word SPEED followed by the number 1. SPEED determines how much reaction time you will have to decode the Gammalon’s cloaking. One is the easiest setting, 5 the most difficult. Push the joystick forward to change your level of difficulty. Then,

Press START to begin the encounter.

Joystick Operation

1. Plug a joystick firmly into jack 1 at the front of the computer console.

2. Hold the joystick with the red fire button in the upper left-hand corner, towards the TV screen.
3. Move your ship in relation to the Gammalons by using the joystick as shown:



4. Fire your missiles by pressing the red fire button.

The Playing Field

Once the playing field appears, freeze the action by pressing the CTRL and "1" keys. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with the display. (To continue, repeat this sequence.)

Across the top of the screen:

AMMO: You have 16 missiles. As each is fired, the marker will disappear from the display.

HITS: You can withstand up to 16 hits before destruction. When you are hit, the screen will flash white and the number of hits before destruction will be displayed.

TIME LEFT: 16 cubes, each sectioned into four quadrants, are displayed.

Each cube represents 4 seconds. Time will count down from left to right across the screen. You have 64 seconds to destroy the Gammalons.

Decode

You must break the Gammalon's code before they will appear on the main view-screen.

Nine blue squares, designated 1 through 9, are located to the left of the display. This is your Decoder. Each blue square will randomly turn red. When it does, press the corresponding number at the top of your computer's keyboard. This will turn the square white.

When you have successfully turned eight of the nine squares to white, you have broken the Gammalon's code, and the three Gammalons will appear on your view-screen.

View-Screen

A star field with a gunsight at its center is presented. After you break the Gammalon's code, three Gammalon warships will skitter about the screen, firing at you.

The two Gammalon fighters are presented as one blue and one yellow triangle. The Gammalon Regnaught is presented as a green square.

Line up a target in your gunsight. When your target is within range, the gunsight will turn bright gold. *Fire your missiles.*

To Destroy the Gammalons

FIGHTERS: Two (2) direct hits are required to destroy each fighter.

REGNAUGHT: Five (5) direct hits are required to destroy the Regnaught.

Note:

1. After you hit an enemy the required number of times, there may be a lapse of a second before it disappears from the screen.
2. You only have to hit a Gammalon ship the required number of times to destroy it. Each hit does not have to follow the next. The computer will keep track of the number of hits, and the Gammalon vessel will disappear after the proper number of hits have been accumulated.

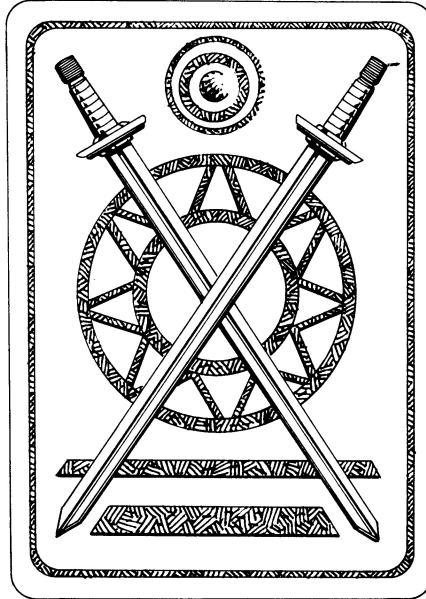
Score

Your final score is based on the time it took to complete your mission, conservation of ammunition, and the number of hits your vessel took.

HIGH SCORE is displayed to allow you to better your previous score or play against a friend.

Press START to play again.

WAR ROOM

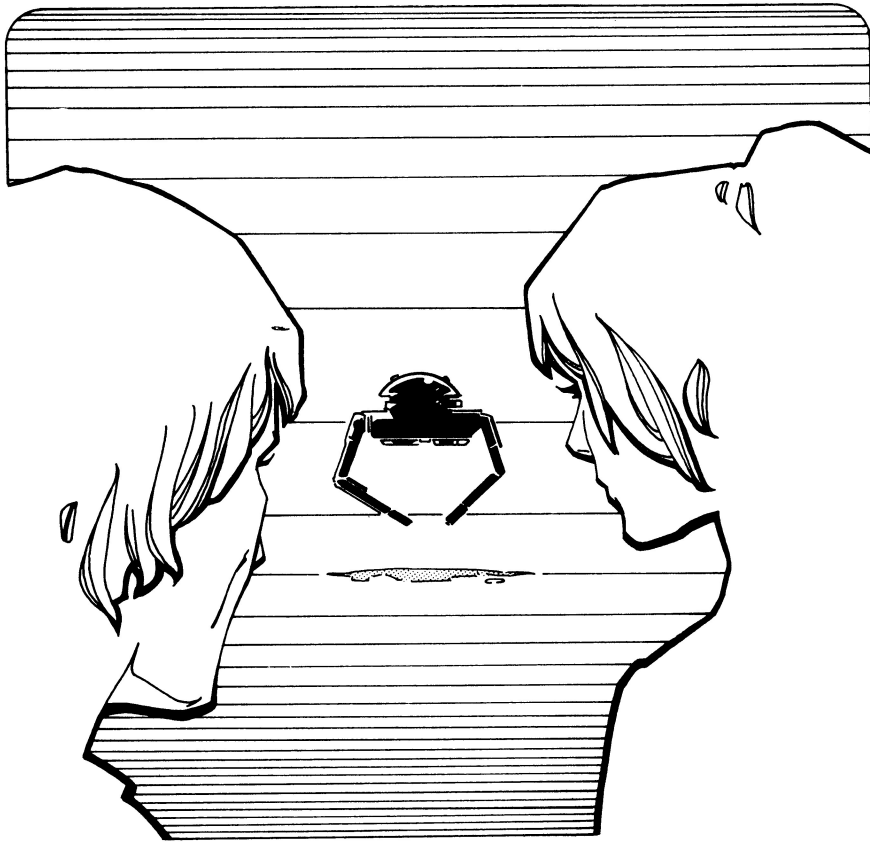


STORY EXCERPT

Jake and Lisa explore the deserted city:

The lighting in the passageway became dimmer as they progressed down its length. It was almost completely dark when they stopped before an ornately engraved door. A golden circle with pointed beams was etched into its face. Crossed swords stood out in bold relief from within the circle's center. A high energy buzz seemed to emanate from the etched sun, and a thin line of blue danced around the door's edge.

Jake cautiously reached for the small knob. His fingers had barely grazed its surface when a snap of energy flung him backwards to the ground. The air smelled of ozone. Jake sat up and looked at his hand. The impression of the knob was burned into his palm.



Then, they met SUZY, a friendly Guardian robot:

A calm, feminine voice startled them. “Clamstor reg nefferani sortag.” They spun around. In back of them, a metallic rectangle hovered a few feet off the ground. Pincer-terminated arms stood out from either side of its body, and red lights blinked on and off across its face. It hummed softly, waiting for their response.

Later, Lisa asks the robot:

“I have one last question.” She turned and pointed. “What’s behind that door?”

The robot answers:

“That was the war room. A restricted access area. I’m afraid that I’ve never been inside, but I do know that no one has ever come out.”

* * * * *

SIX DEADLY ADVERSARIES

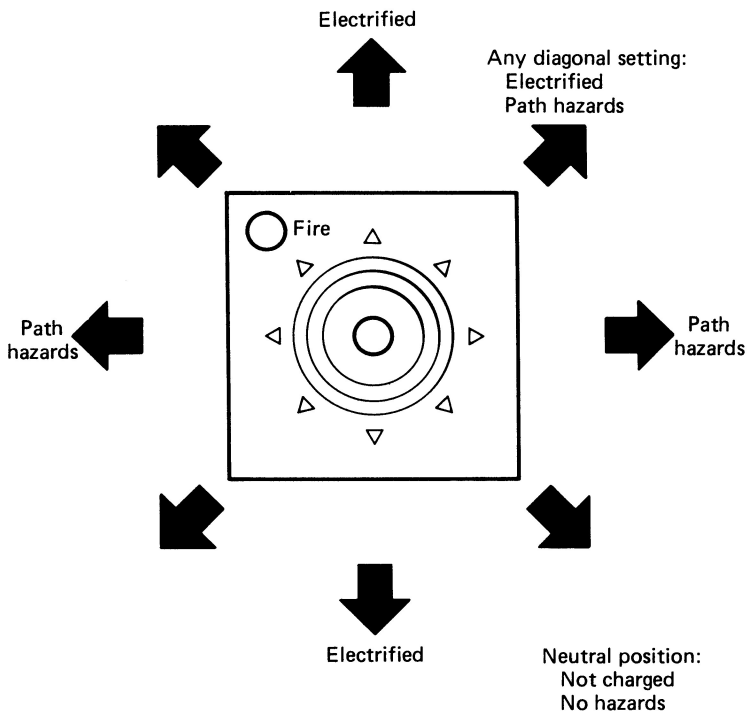
Steel your nerves and prepare to enter the War Room, if you dare.

Electrified and moving walls, two deadly sentinels, land mines, and the treacherous “Clean-up Robot” wait to destroy you before you reach SUZY, and safety. Good luck!

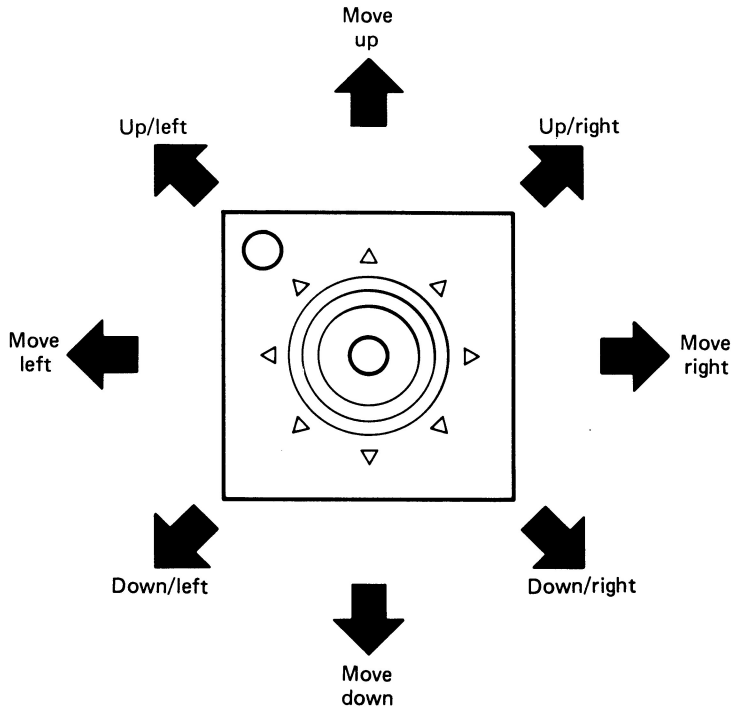
HOW TO PLAY WAR ROOM

Using the Controller

1. Plug a joystick firmly into jack 1 at the front of the computer console.
2. Hold the joystick with the red button in the upper left-hand corner, towards the TV screen.
3. Select game options by moving the joystick as shown:



4. Move your player through the mazes by using the joystick as shown:



Game Options

Before playing, you may preset combinations of options to predetermine the game's level of difficulty.

1. **NUMBER OF ROOMS:** The number of rooms to be traversed is displayed at the top of the screen. Press the SELECT button on your computer to choose any number of rooms from 3 to 9.
2. **NOT CHARGED/NO HAZARDS:** This basic option requires no joystick selection. You race against time as you explore the twisting mazes of the War Room, at no risk of attack. Use this option to hone your skills for the encounters to follow, or challenge a friend to an exciting maze race.
3. **PATH HAZARDS:** Prepare for adventure when you select this option. You will be attacked and harassed by unexpected adversaries. They will do everything in their power to prevent you from racing through the mazes and reaching safety and SUZY. You have three chances to make it through alive. Use them well!

4. *ELECTRIFIED*: The walls are charged with energy. Touch them and you perish. You'll need lots of skill and patience to make it through unscathed. Again, use your three chances wisely.

5. *ELECTRIFIED/PATH HAZARDS*: This option is definitely not for the novice. The walls are electrically charged and your every move is challenged by the deadly keepers of the War Room. Consider yourself a full-fledged Space Knight if you survive this level of play and reach SUZY.

To Begin

After you have selected your play options, push the joystick firmly in the direction of the option you have selected and press the red trigger button to begin play.

The Warm Up Room

Your player begins each encounter in a large empty room with doors at either end. This is the "Warm Up Room." Explore this room and practice your joystick control skills . . . but . . . be prepared to face unexpected challenges if you've selected PATH HAZARDS, and remain here longer than ten seconds!

The Random Challenge

Each time you enter the War Room, you will face a different and exciting challenge. The sequence of floor plans and the adversaries you encounter will always vary. You won't know what lies ahead until you open a door and enter . . . then, there is no turning back.

Scoring

"HIGH SCORE," "YOUR SCORE," and "YOUR TIME" are displayed at the end of each play sequence.

Score is calculated by your computer as the ratio of time taken to traverse the mazes, and the number of times you hit a wall. For every 30 seconds of play time, a penalty of 1 point is deducted from your overall score.

120 bonus points are awarded if you select the *ELECTRIFIED* or *PATH HAZARD* options.

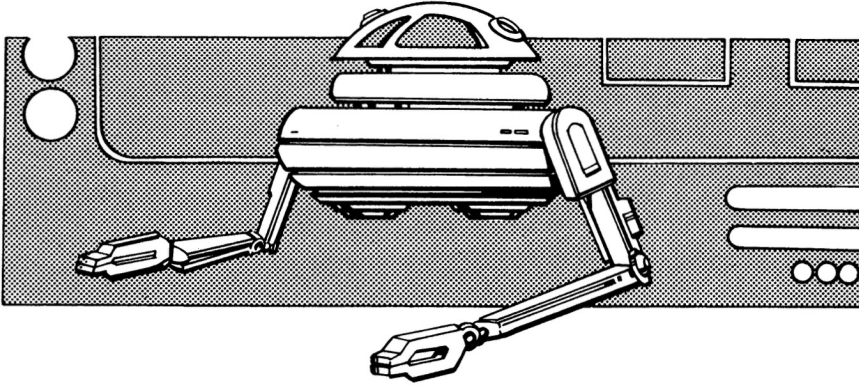
45 bonus points are awarded for every “life” that remains when you reach SUZY.

“YOUR TIME” is the actual time in seconds it took your last player to either reach SUZY or to be destroyed.

WAR ROOM is a game of skill and daring with increasing levels of difficulty and a multitude of dangers.

— **GOOD LUCK SPACE KNIGHT!** —

BUG BUSTER



INTRODUCTION

Jake and Lisa have been visiting the planet Palo Cosmos. They were summoned by the planet's Governor, Hank, to "Save the planet from millions of microbes."

On Palo Cosmos, they learn of a selective bacteria that is destroying the Cosmos Grape. This grape plant, a carefully nurtured hybrid of other pure varietal grapes, is used in making Cosmos wine, the mainstay of Palo Cosmos' culture and economy.

Jake and Lisa's medical supplies were lost during a previous battle with Gammalon pirates. After all other avenues of assistance are considered, they decide that Lisa's new-found robot friend, Suzy, must be left behind to fight the bacteria.

Hank has flown Jake and Lisa back to their ship to bring Suzy down to Palo Cosmos.

STORY EXCERPT

Suzy hovered next to Hank in the airlock, her red and green lights pulsing slowly, as if to show sadness.

Hank smiled. "Don't worry, Lisa. I'll take good care of her. After all, she's going to save the Cosmos. And"—he raised his hand in the "C" salute—"she'll be a natural."

Suzy's right arm lifted and her pincers formed a "C." "See what I mean?" he laughed.

Lisa held Jake's hand and took a deep breath. "Bye Suzy." She held back tears and added, "Goodby . . . Hank." Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned and marched stiffly back to the control room.

She collapsed into her chair and forced herself to concentrate on performing the routine escape-orbit systems check.

* * * * *

In the game of BUG BUSTER, it's up to you to control Suzy and battle the deadly microbes before they escape and destroy the precious Cosmos grape crop.

Hank and his friends are counting on you. Don't let them down.

— *NOW IT'S UP TO YOU TO* —

SAVE PALO COSMOS

In *Bug Buster*, you control the friendly robot, Suzy, in a battle against nine deadly microbes.

Your challenge is to destroy as many bugs as possible before they escape off the screen to attack Hank's Cosmos vines.

A Word About Energy

You begin each game with a 99 unit ration of energy. Energy is depleted as follows:

1. - 1 Energy Unit for each square you move.
2. - 5 Energy Units each time Bug Spray is fired.

3. – 30 Energy Units each time the PROTECTOR runs into you.
4. – 60 Energy Units each time you run into the PROTECTOR.

Options

You may select various options before starting the game:

Speed

You can select either SLOW or FAST speed. The challenge is more difficult if the FAST option is selected . . . but the rewards are higher! You are awarded 40 bonus points for selecting the more difficult option.

Protector

The PROTECTOR is a mean little critter who will appear to taunt you if you choose the YES option. PROTECTOR's mission is, as his name implies, to protect his fellow bugs. When activated, you will find that he will really bug you! He will chase after you, bent on annihilating you before you complete your mission. Because the PROTECTOR is such a pest, you are awarded a bonus of 50 points for selecting this option.

30 Energy Units are deducted from your ration if PROTECTOR runs into you.

60 Energy Units are deducted from your ration if you run into the PROTECTOR.

Bug Spray

This is your ultimate weapon! If you elect to carry a can of Bug Spray on your mission, you can spray the microbes with a deadly mist from a range of two squares. Since this gives you a slight advantage, you will lose 5 energy points every time you fire the spray.

Wrap

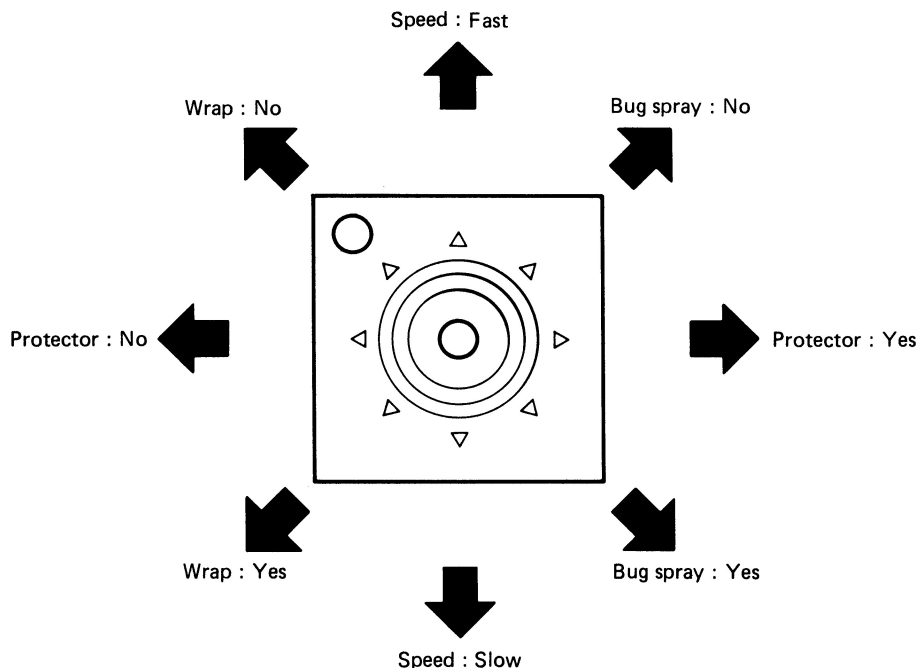
If you select the YES option, Suzy will be able to leave one side of the screen, wrap around, and come out on the opposite side. This can speed

up your pursuit of the escaping bugs. Since using the *WRAP* option gives you an advantage, 40 points are deducted from your final score.

Joystick Control

Selecting options can be tricky at first, but once you've got the hang of it, it's actually fun in itself.

Plug a joystick into port 1 and select options as shown in the drawing below:



To Play

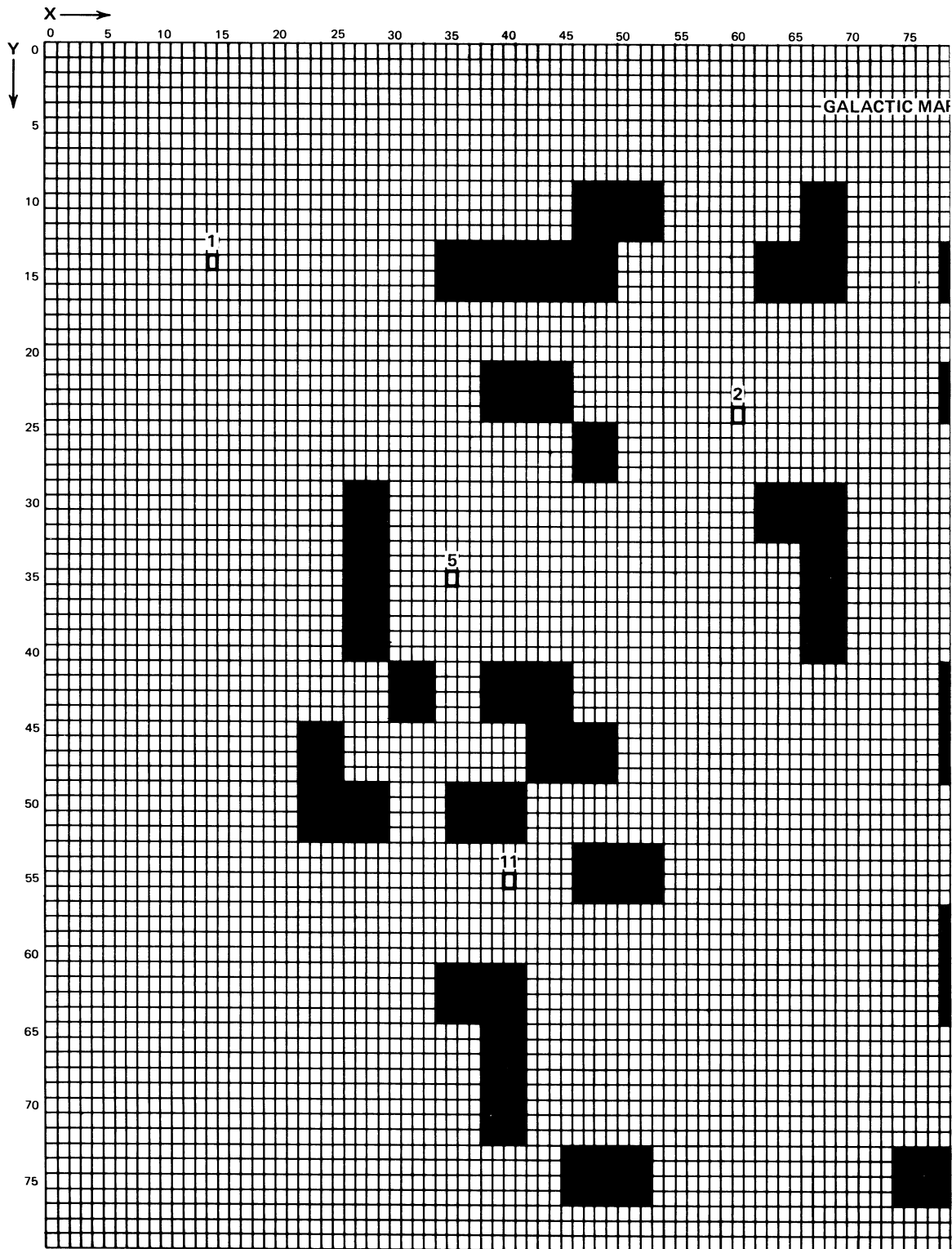
Now that you have selected the game options, it's time to battle the bugs.

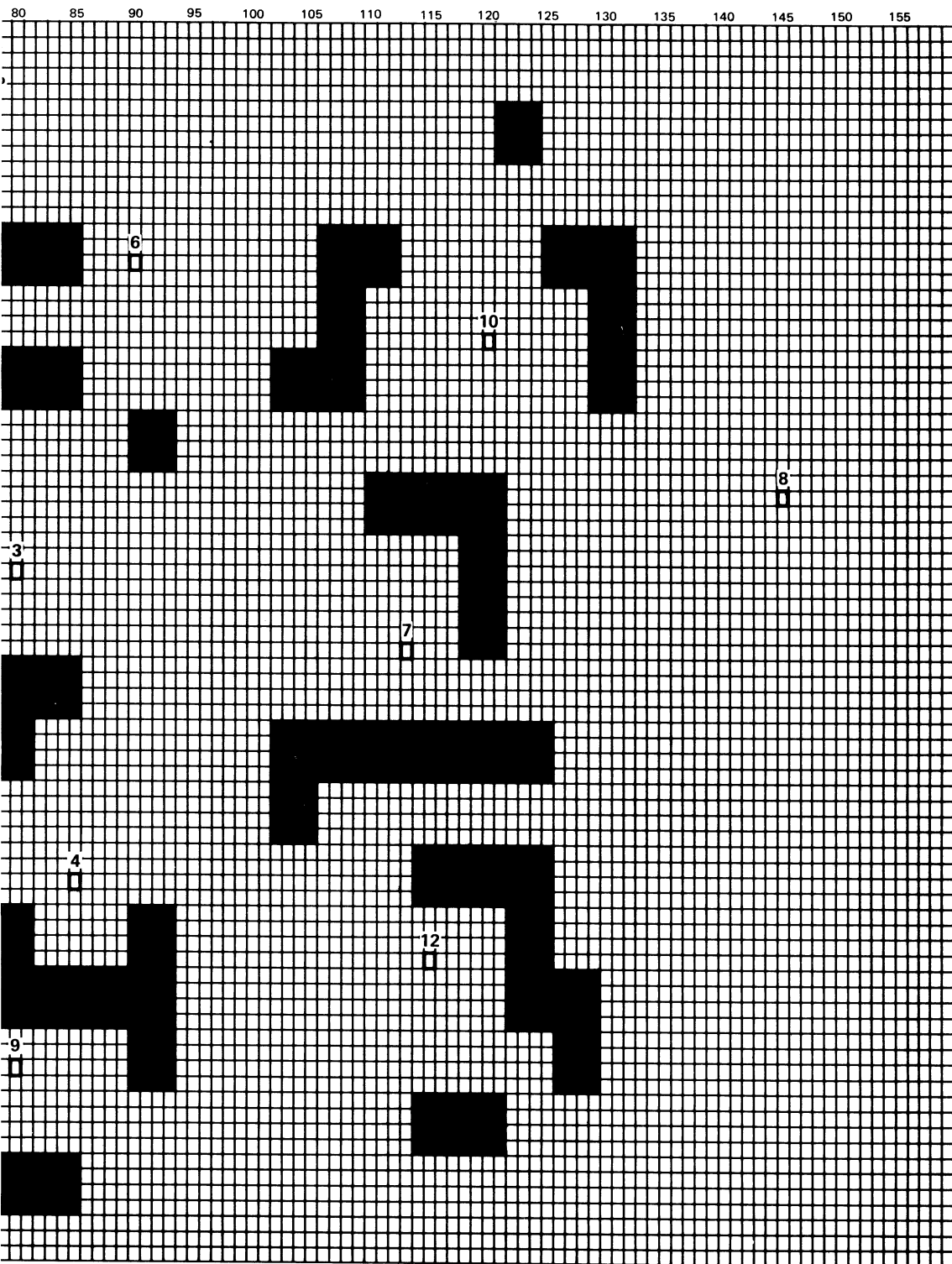
Press the joystick's red trigger button to begin play.

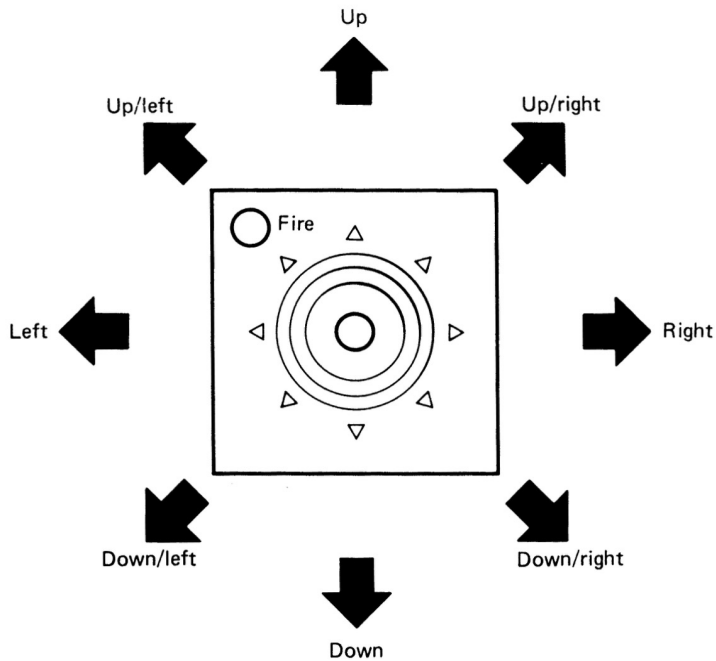
Maneuver Suzy with the joystick as shown in the drawing on the following page.

Pick out a bug, track it down, touch it with Suzy, and it will be destroyed.

If you have selected the BUG SPRAY option, position Suzy two squares from the targeted bugs. Point the joystick in the direction of the bug and press the red trigger button to fire the spray.







Score

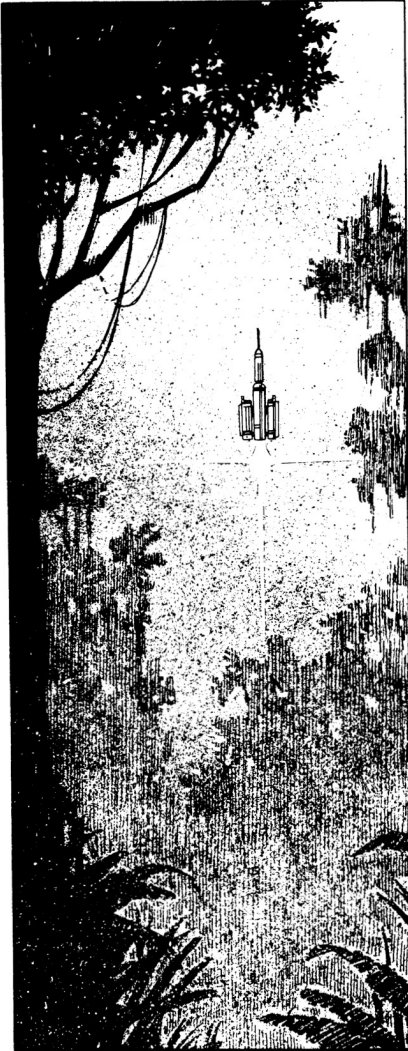
Your score and the high score are displayed at the end of each game.

Score is calculated as a combination of the difficulty you have selected, the number of bugs that escaped, and the energy Suzy has expended.

To Play Again

Press the red trigger button to play your next game of BUG BUSTER.

WEOMBY



STORY EXCERPT

Jake and Lisa prepare to land their damaged ship on the alien planet, Weomby:

“Hot wind buffeted the damaged craft as it sliced through Weomby’s thick polluted atmosphere. The Egg-tube transport wobbled back and forth like a dragonfly standing on end, as Jake struggled with the side thrusters and Lisa controlled their rate of descent.

Weomby was a planet of desperation. The atmosphere told part of the story. The ship’s sensors and CLIDE’s interactive screen warned of the hell that awaited them. Nuclear radiation . . . residue from a war long lost. The screen flashed red, the alarm sounded, but neither Jake nor Lisa had time to look up from their stations. They had passed the point of no return and struggled to bring the bulky transport down intact.”

Lisa screams as, out of control, they approach the planet:

“Jake! My God, we’re going to crash. Control it. Control it, for God’s sake!”

"I'm trying. I'm trying." Jake's hands were welded to the control stick, maneuvering the bulky ship towards the ground that was racing up to meet them.

"Impact in ten and counting . . . niner . . . eight . . ." CLIDE voiced the obvious. "Seven . . . six . . ."

"This is . . ." Jake didn't have time to finish. It happened fast. In the last four seconds, the rocket tore through the upper cover of trees and smashed uncontrolled into the muck of Weomby.

* * * * *

— **PREPARE TO LAND ON** —

WEOMBY

This real time simulator puts you in control. Activate the side thrusters. Ease in the retro rockets, and land your Eggtube transport . . . if you can.

HOW TO PLAY WEOMBY

Setting Up Landing Conditions

Before landing, you may choose combinations of options that will predetermine *Weomby's* level of difficulty.

The Option and Select Keys

Each time you press the SELECT key, GRAVITY, FUEL or STRUCTURE will glow bright gold on your screen.

1. Selecting Gravity

Press the SELECT key until "GRAVITY" turns gold. Next press the OPTION key and choose one of these landing sites:

LUNA: Gravitational force 5 (Weak)

WEOMBY: Gravitational force 10 (Medium)

SATURN: Gravitational force 15 (Strong)

A setting of LUNA is recommended for your first landing.

2. Selecting Fuel

Press the SELECT key until "FUEL" turns gold. Next press the OPTION key and choose the amount of fuel on board:

LITTLE: 510 tons of fuel.

AVERAGE: 1,157 tons of fuel.

A LOT: 1,661 tons of fuel.

Take aboard "A LOT" of fuel for your maiden landing.

3. Your Ship's Strength

The strength of your ship's structure will determine the impact it can withstand at landing.

Press the SELECT key until "STRUCTURE" turns gold. Next press the OPTION key and choose one of these structures:

FRAGILE: Maximum landing velocity, 5.

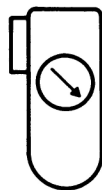
STANDARD: Maximum landing velocity, 10.

STRONG: Maximum landing velocity, 15.

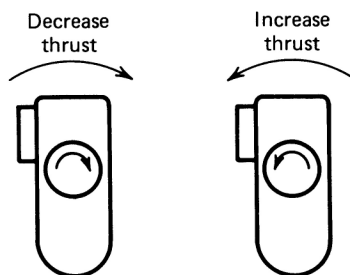
A setting of STRONG is recommended for your first landing.

Retro-Rockets

1. Plug the paddles firmly into jack 1 at the front of the computer console.
2. Use only the *left-most* paddle to control retro-rocket thrust. The other paddle is not employed in this game.
3. To help orient your paddle, turn the knob clockwise until it stops, and tape an indicator arrow on top as shown:

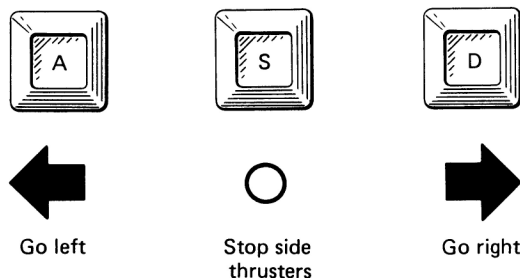


4. Fire your retro-rockets by turning the paddle's knob in a counterclockwise (left) direction. The further you turn in this direction, the greater the thrust. Turning the paddle to the right will deactivate retros:



Side Thrusters

The side thrusters are used to maneuver your ship from side to side. The “A,” “S,” and “D” keys control this movement as shown:



CAUTION: Your ship will continue to drift after you press the “S” key. Motion will come to a gradual stop, not a screeching halt.

Before you press START

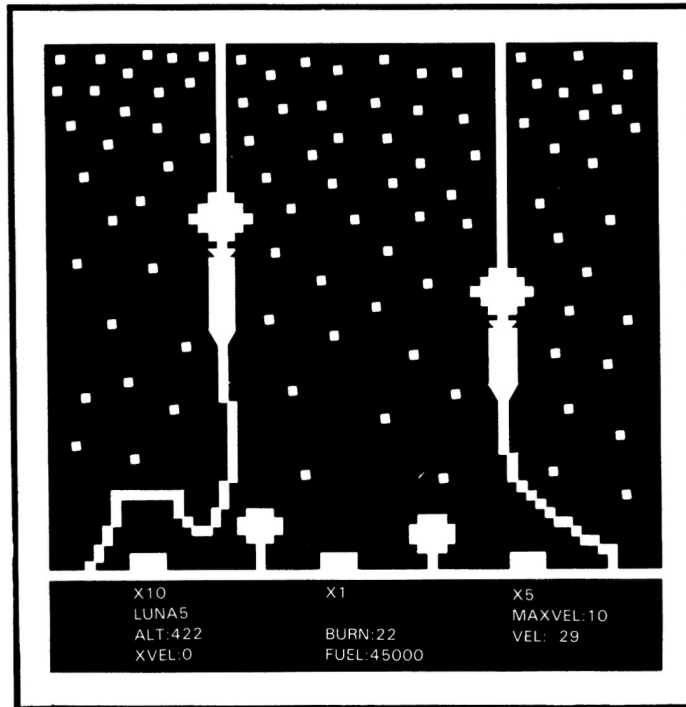
Now that you have selected the landing conditions, plugged in the controller, and learned how to maneuver your rocket, you are ready to play Weomby.

Just for Practice

To help you get acquainted with the controls (without having to worry about fuel consumption) *press and hold the red trigger at the side of the controller as you press START.*

This will give you 50,000 tons of fuel. However, you will not receive any score for successful landings in practice mode.

After Pressing START



Once the playing field appears, freeze the action by pressing the CTRL and "1" keys. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with the display. (To continue, repeat this sequence.)

The object, as illustrated, is to land your spacecraft on one of the three designated landing pads before running out of fuel, while not exceeding the maximum velocity displayed.

For your convenience, a comprehensive read-out is displayed at the bottom of the screen. (Please refer to screen display.)

1. *LUNA 5*: Displays the gravitational strength of the location you have selected.
2. *FUEL*: Displays fuel consumed as you fire retros or side thrusters.

3. **ALTITUDE:** Displays altitude in meters.
4. **MAX VEL:** Displays the maximum allowable landing velocity. **YOUR SHIP WILL BE DESTROYED ON IMPACT IF YOU EXCEED THIS VELOCITY.**
5. **VEL:** Displays velocity in meters/hour. A negative velocity, such as -15, indicates upward motion of your spaceship. A positive number, such as 15, tells you that your craft is descending.

Helpful Hints

1. Because *Weomby* is an accurate landing simulator, the maneuvering controls are extremely sensitive. **EASY DOES IT!** Once you leave the upper portion of the screen, the game ends.
2. Ask a friend to help you land. One person can control the side thrusters while the other operates the retros. Teamwork works! And it's fun!

Scoring

Your final score is a combination of a number of factors:

1. **ACCURACY:** How close you land to, or where you land on, the landing pad. The closer to the landing pad, the higher the score.
2. **DIFFICULTY:** Your selected gravity, fuel, and the pad you land on, all contribute to this factor.
3. **FUEL:** The quantity of fuel consumed in landing. The less fuel used, the higher the score.

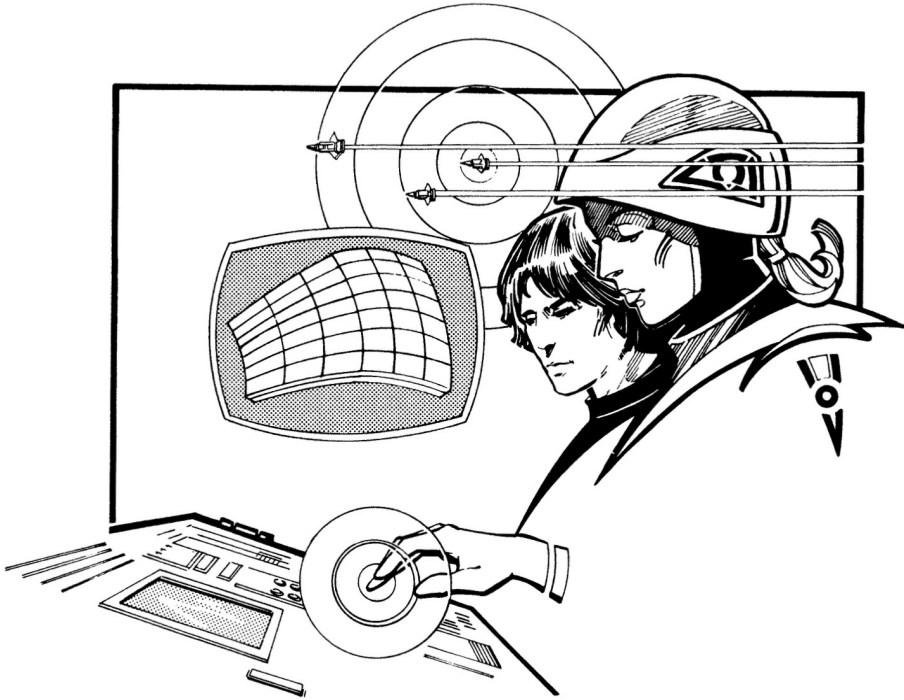
Want to Play Again?

Press the **OPTION** key to replay *Weomby* with the same landing conditions.

Press the **START** key to set up new landing conditions.

— **HAPPY LANDINGS!** —

NAVIGATE



FROM FLIGHT PLAN TO ORBIT

In NAVIGATE, you can travel between 144 different possible combinations of planets. You or the computer have 12 choices of your start and destination planet. (See PLANET NAMES on page 141.)

Once you've selected which planet you're headed for, you calculate

and plot your course and burn vectors on the Galactic Map. You then transfer the course lines to the computer's display.

Before beginning your journey, you're given a last chance to correct any of your course entries.

After real time navigation begins, you must stay on course by executing a series of carefully timed vector burns until you orbit your destination planet.

Score

Your score depends on the accuracy of your flight up to and including orbit around your destination planet. You are also awarded extra points for fuel and oxygen conservation.

The Hazards of Space

Many hazards await you in deep space. Fly off course, and you risk entering the inferno of a fire cloud, or you may run out of fuel and have to signal for help from a neighboring planet. In the vacuum of space, suffocation is only a breath away, so don't deplete your oxygen supply!

Much More Than a Game

NAVIGATE is much more than a game.

Once you've mastered NAVIGATE, you will have learned the essentials of space navigation: course plotting, vector algebra, and fuel and oxygen conservation.

Good luck, Space Knight! I hope you did your homework as thoroughly as Lisa.

The Galactic Map

A fold-out Galactic grid map is furnished with your Space Knights package following page 124. This is your preflight planning worksheet. (Don't write on it. Instead, run off a number of extra copies at a local copy center so you'll always have a good supply on hand.)

A series of numbers is printed across (X), and down (Y) along the sides of the map. The location of any point on the map is identified as the intersection of two coordinates. Here is an example:

Planet 1 (HOME WORLD) is located at the intersection of coordinates 14(X),14(Y).

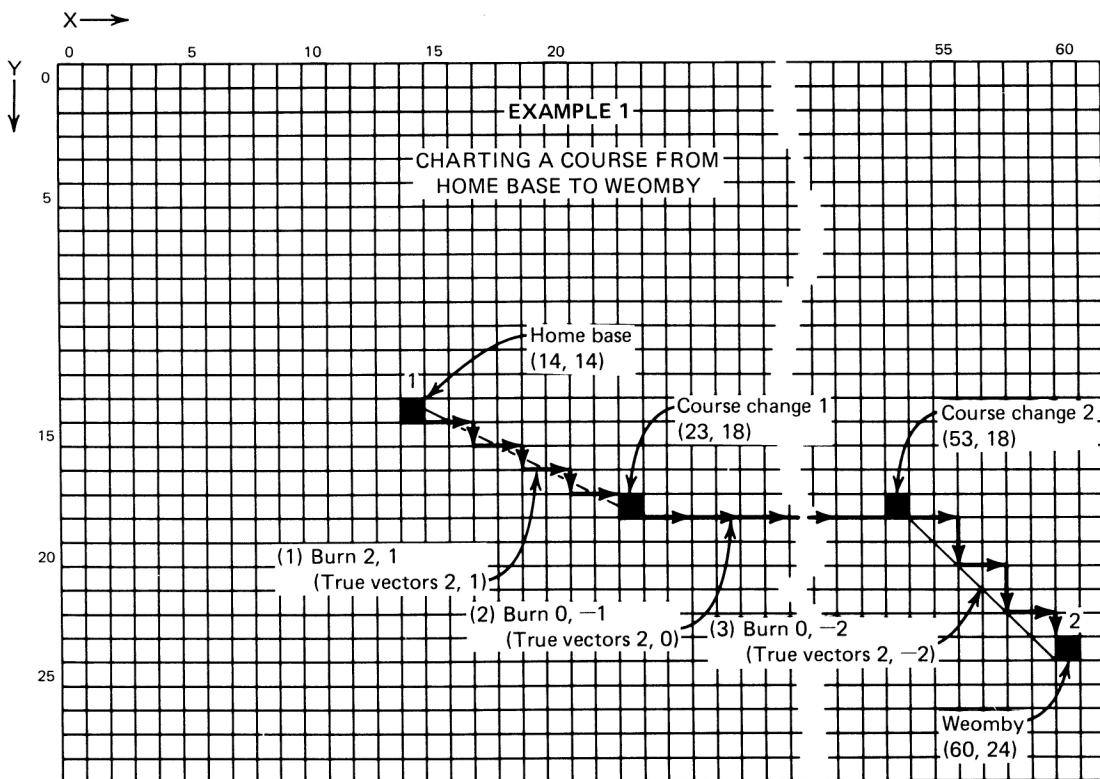
Planet 2 (WEOMBY) is located at the intersection of coordinates 60(X), 24(Y).

The X coordinate is always stated first.

Charting Your Course

Grab a pencil and your Galactic Map, put on your thinking cap, and we'll chart a course from HOME WORLD to WEOMBY. After you've learned how to plot and travel between these two planets, you'll be able to navigate anywhere in the universe.

EXAMPLE I shows an expanded view of the Burn Vectors and course changes needed to travel between HOME WORLD and WEOMBY.



Burn Vectors

Burn Vectors are simply the two directions and thrust strengths which, when combined, cause your spacecraft to travel for the distance and in the direction of the combination of both forces. Here are some examples:

A Burn Vector of 2, -1 will cause your ship to travel at a rate of 2 spaces to the right and one space down.

A Burn Vector of -2, -1 will cause your ship to travel at a rate of 2 spaces to the left and 1 space down.

A Burn Vector of 0,1 will cause your ship to travel straight up at a rate of 1 space at a time.

A Burn Vector of 0, -3 will cause your ship to travel straight down at a rate of 3 spaces at a time.

One very important limitation: **THE MAXIMUM BURN VECTORS ALLOWABLE ARE 3,3 (-3, -3).** Your spacecraft just can't deliver more thrust than 3,3.

You can use any combination of vectors to stay on course, as long as you do not exceed a burn of 3 (-3) in either the X or Y direction.

Step 1

In the example, I have decided that my first Burn Vectors will be 2 and -1. These will take me down and to the right, allowing me to stop at coordinates 23,18. Coordinates 23,18 set my ship up for a straight shot through the two fire clouds.

Use your pencil. Begin at HOME WORLD (14,14) and draw a line 2 spaces to the right and 1 down. Continue until you reach coordinates 23,18. Now draw a straight course line connecting points 14,14 to 23,18.

Step 2

After stopping at 23,18 you will have to enter new Burn Vectors to allow you to travel straight across to the right.

I have elected to enter 0 and 1. I have used zero (0) for my X entry because it causes no change to the previous X Burn Vector. In effect, the X Burn Vector remains at 2. ($0 + 2 = 2$.)

I have used 1 for my Y entry because it changes my previous Y entry to 0. ($-1 + 1 = 0$.)

Use your pencil. Begin at coordinates 23,18 and draw a series of lines 2 spaces to the right until you reach coordinates 53,18. Now draw a straight course line connecting points 23,18 to 53,18.

Step 3

After stopping at 53,18 you will enter your final Burn Vectors to travel down and to the right to reach WEOMBY. (60,24.)

I have elected to use 0 for my X entry because it causes no change to the previous X Burn Vector. The X Burn Vector will remain at 2.

I have used -2 for my Y entry because it changes my previous Y entry to -2. ($0 - 2 = -2$)

Use your pencil. Begin at coordinates 53,18 and draw a series of lines 2 spaces to the right and 2 spaces down until you reach WEOMBY, coordinates 60,24. Now draw a straight course line connecting points 53,18 to 60,24.

That's it! Your preflight planning is complete and you are now ready to begin your journey.

If you haven't already loaded NAVIGATE into your computer, do it now.

Your first step is to transfer the course line information from your Galactic Map to the computer's display.

The word BEGIN? is printed in the text window below the computer's Galactic Map.

Enter the number 1 and press RETURN. The word DESTINATION? will appear. Enter the number 2 and press RETURN.

****If you want the computer to choose two random locations, enter 0 at both prompts.**

After you have entered two locations, the text window will display your choices, their Galactic Coordinates (GC), and the distance between the two in light years. It will prompt you to continue by pressing START.

Before you press START, reconfirm your start and destination planets by pressing the OPTION and SELECT keys.

Press START

Entry mode 1 (M1) will appear in the text window after you have pressed START. Three optional entries are offered: ENTER, SHOW, or DONE. The computer waits for your orders with the word ORDERS?

It's now time to enter your course lines. Type in the word ENTER and press return.

1. The prompt ENTER CHANGE 1 NEW COORDINATES? will appear in the text window.

Refer to your Galactic Chart and enter your first coordinates: 23,18.

You will always press RETURN after each computer entry. In the following instructions, "press RETURN" will not appear in this text.

2. The prompt ENTER CHANGE 2 . . . will appear in the text window.

Refer to your Galactic Chart and enter your second coordinates: 53,18.

3. The prompt ENTER CHANGE 3 . . . will appear in the text window.

Refer to your Galactic Chart and enter your third and final set of coordinates: 60,24.

Now that all your coordinates are entered in the computer, and the course lines have been drawn on the screen, type in the word "DONE."

The text window now tells you that your programming is done, the total entries are 3, and you have the OPTION of either modifying the courses entered or pressing START to begin your journey.

To Modify Course Entries

(You may skip this section if you want to begin play now without modifying any of your courses.)

Press OPTION.

Entry mode 2 (M2), will appear in the text window after you press OPTION.

As an example, you will modify course 3.

Enter 3 in response to the prompt VIEW COURSE CHANGE? The text window will show that course 3 is TO (60,24) FROM (53,18) and ask if you want to CHANGE this course or if you are DONE.

Enter the word "CHANGE." The text window will tell you that this course was previously (60,24), and prompt with the words NOW WHAT?

Enter 100,50. (Or any other two numbers that come to mind. Remember, this is only for practice.)

The text window will indicate that your new coordinates have been ACCEPTED and ask ANY MORE? Enter the word "No."

The text window will return to mode 1 (M1) and again offer these three options: ENTER, SHOW, or DONE. Enter the word "SHOW."

Now you're way off course! But don't panic, you've learned how to modify your course entries, and getting back on track is now a simple matter:

1. Enter the word "DONE"
2. Press OPTION
3. View course 3
4. CHANGE to 60,24
5. Enter the word "DONE"
6. Enter the word "SHOW"

That's it, all back to normal, so let's begin the journey.

The Journey

You should be in entry mode 1 (M1). Enter the word "DONE," then press START to begin your journey.

The computer's Galactic Map will change color to red, and mode 4 (M4) will appear in the text window. Mode 4 is the Real Time display and will tell you your LOCATION (XLOC: YLOC:), how much oxygen you are consuming, and your vector burns (XVEL: YVEL:). *Don't remain in this mode unless you are in actual flight because precious oxygen is being consumed!*

To continue, press START again.

Entry mode 3 (M3) will appear in the text window after you have pressed START. Five (5) optional entries will be displayed: BURN, ORBIT, SIGNAL, ZERO V, CONTINUE.

Enter the word "BURN."

You are now in the BURN mode and ready to enter your first set of Burn Vectors.

Enter 2, - 1.

Once you press RETURN, your ship will move down the course line. Your X and Y locations will count down in the text window, which is now in Mode 4. *Press the START key to stop your ship at coordinates 23,18 (XLOC:23 YLOC:18).*

Now, following the same sequence, enter your next burn: 0,1 and stop at coordinates 53,18 (XLOC:53 YLOC:18).

Enter your final burn: 0, - 2, and stop at your destination, WEOMBY, coordinates 60,24 (XLOC:60 YLOC:24).

— YOU MADE IT! —

Now, all you have to do is ORBIT the planet and see how well you did.

Enter the word "ORBIT" and your final score will be displayed.

The SCORE screen will tell you:

1. *FUEL USED*: How much fuel you used in tons.
2. *OXYGEN USED*: How much oxygen you used in cubic meters.
3. *ORBIT RING*: How close you orbited around the planet in units. A score of 100 is good.
4. *PENALTY*: A penalty, expressed in percentage, is deducted from

your overall score for straying off course. When you stray off the course line, the computer screen will flash on and off to let you know that you are off course and are being penalized.

5. **SCORE**; Your score for this game.

6. **HIGH SCORE**: The highest score of a series of games.

7. **RANK**; You've done a good job, Space Knight, and are awarded a rank of either **LIEUTENANT**, **COMMANDER**, or **FLEET NAVIGATOR**!

Other Features

In the above example flight, you did not use all the options available, nor did you find out what happens if you run out of fuel, run out of oxygen, or crash into a fire cloud! I leave these for you to experience first-hand.

Commands

CHANGE: (Mode 2). Enter "CHANGE" when you have elected to change/modify a course.

CONTINUE: (Mode 3). Enter "CONTINUE" to continue your journey in the same direction as you have been going.

DONE: (Mode 1). Enter "DONE" when your course plotting is completed.

DONE: (Mode 2). Enter "DONE" when your course modifications have been completed.

ENTER: (Mode 1). Enter "ENTER" to enter course coordinates. (How many times is that guy going to say, "enter?")

ORBIT: (Mode 3). Enter "ORBIT" when you have arrived at your destination.

SHOW: (Mode 1). Enter "SHOW" and your modified course will be displayed.

SIGNAL: (Mode 3). Enter "SIGNAL" to call for assistance when your situation appears hopeless . . . almost out of fuel or oxygen.

ZERO Vectors: (Mode 3). Enter "ZERO V" when you've drifted off course

and want to zero your Burn Vectors. After entering "ZERO V," your Burn Vectors will equal 0,0.

Planet names

PLANET 1: HOME WORLD

2: WEOMBY

3: QUEST

4: GAMMALA

5: COSMOS

6: CLIDEVILLE

7: PANARAMA

8: GNOASHII

9: CORRIDOR

10: TRADEWORLD

11: JADE

12: HARNACLE

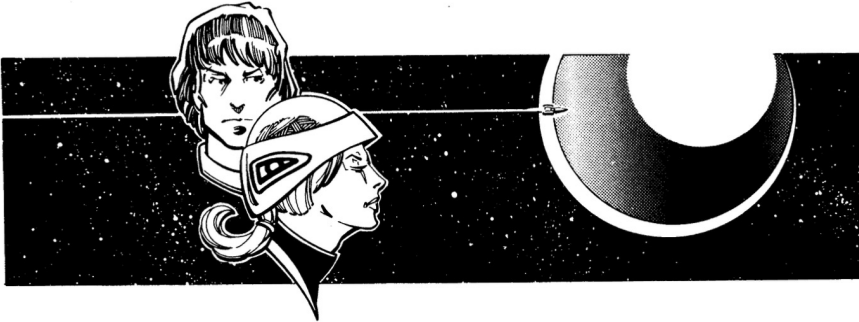
—— *GOOD LUCK, SPACE KNIGHT!*

STAY ON COURSE

AND

HAVE AN EXCITING JOURNEY ——

IMPACT



IMPACT is a landing simulation that you view from *within your rocket!*

You control your rate of descent with the paddle, and center your ship over the landing pad by firing side thrusters in *eight (8)* sideways directions.

Positioning your rocket can be made more difficult if you choose the WIND option. In this mode, unexpected gusts of wind will buffet your ship in random directions.

To add to the realism, comprehensive readouts are printed at the bottom of your console, and a “direction” indicator points towards the center of the landing pad.

The object of IMPACT is to land your ship as close to the center of the landing pad as possible, below or at a selected speed, in the shortest period of time, using as little fuel as you can.

HOW TO PLAY *IMPACT*

Setting Up Landing Conditions

Before landing, you may choose conditions that will determine IMPACT's level of difficulty.

The Option and Select Keys

The game begins in these default modes:

OPTION: NO WIND

SELECT: 2 = HARD

The Option Key

Press the OPTION key to select between NO WIND and WIND conditions. If you select the WIND option, your ship will encounter unexpected gusts of wind as it descends.

The Select Key

By pressing and holding down the SELECT key, the counter will increase from "2 = HARD," through a number of "EASY" settings, to a final setting of "52 = SIMPLE."

These numbers indicate your maximum allowable landing speed.

It is HARD to land at a maximum speed of 2, and SIMPLE (not as difficult) to land at a maximum speed of 52.

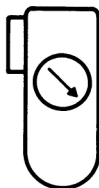
Settings of "SELECT: NO WIND" and "OPTION: 52 = SIMPLE" are recommended for your first landings.

Add WIND and decrease the landing speed as you become more proficient.

Retro-Rockets

1. Plug the paddles firmly into jack 1 at the front of the computer console.
2. Use only the *left-most* paddle to control retro-rocket thrust. The other paddle is not employed in this game.

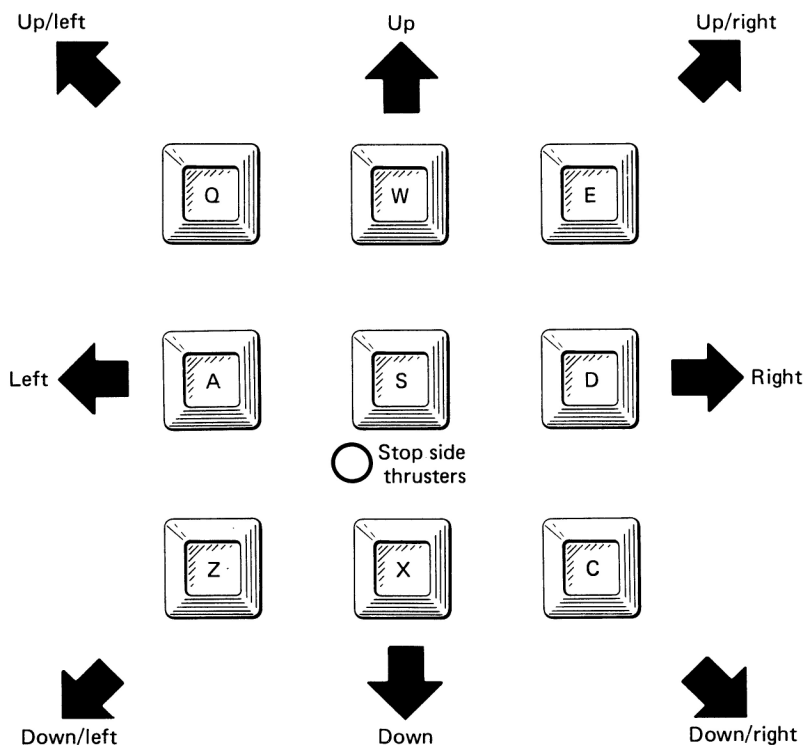
3. To help orient your paddle, turn the knob clockwise, until it stops, and tape an indicator arrow on top as shown:



4. Fire your retro-rockets by turning the paddle's knob in a counterclockwise (left) direction. The further you turn in this direction, the greater the thrust. (Maximum thrust is 15.) Turning the paddle completely to the right will deactivate retros.

Side Thrusters

Side thrusters enable you to maneuver your ship in eight (8) sideways directions. The Q, W, E, A, S, D, Z, X, and C keys control this movement as shown:



CAUTION: Your ship will continue to drift after you press the “S” (Stop) key. Motion will come to a gradual stop, not a screeching halt.

Now that you have selected the landing conditions, plugged in the controller, and learned how to maneuver your rocket, you are ready to play IMPACT.

PRESS START TO BEGIN PLAY

Once the playing field appears, freeze the action by pressing the CTRL and “1” keys. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with the display. (To continue, repeat this sequence.)

The Center of the Display

The gold cross in the center of the screen is your sight. You will maneuver your craft so as to position this sight as close to the center of the landing pad as possible.

Because you begin each game at a fairly high altitude, the landing pad may not be immediately visible. As you descend, the landing pad will come into view. There is a small dot at its center. This is your target, ground zero.

The Left Side of the Display

SIDE CONTROL INDICATORS

Nine rectangles are located at the upper left-hand corner of your display. Each of these nine rectangles will turn bright green as a corresponding side thruster button is pressed. For example: When you press the “S” key, to turn off your side thrusters, the center rectangle will turn green.

LONG DISTANCE VIEW

The open space below the CONTROL INDICATORS displays a “long distance” view of your ship. Your rocket will appear in this area as a point of light that is either moving up or down. When you apply thrust, a thin “thrust line” will trail this dot.

SIDE MOTION INDICATOR

The box below the long distance view displays your craft’s sideways movement. If you press “D,” to move your ship to the left, an arrow will point to the left. If you press “S,” to turn off your side thruster, a dot will appear in the center of the box.

The Right Side of the Display

FINAL APPROACH INDICATOR

A graduated rectangle at the right of your console displays your ship's final approach. Your ship will appear in this area just prior to landing.

The horizontal line at the bottom of this display is the ground.

Far Right Display

LANDING PAD LOCATOR

The small box centered off the right of the main display is your landing pad locator. The arrow in this box will always point towards the center of the landing pad. This helps you determine which side thruster to fire, and is invaluable in locating the landing pad when it is off the screen.

Read-Out

A comprehensive read-out is displayed at the bottom of the screen.

1. **FUEL:** Displays fuel consumed as you fire retros or side thrusters.
2. **ALT:** Displays your altitude in kilometers.
3. **V (Velocity):** Displays velocity in kilometers/hour. A negative velocity, such as -15 , indicates upwards motion of your spaceship. A positive number, such as 15 , tells you that your craft is descending.
4. **MV (Maximum Velocity):** Displays your maximum allowable landing velocity. **YOUR SHIP WILL BE DESTROYED ON IMPACT IF YOU EXCEED THIS VELOCITY.**
5. **XVEL (X Velocity):** Displays your left and right velocity.
6. **YVEL (Y Velocity):** Displays your relative upwards and downwards velocity.

Helpful Hints

1. Because IMPACT is an accurate landing simulator,

there is a slight delay between activation of controls and response of your craft. Learn to plan ahead.

2. Ask a friend to help you land. One person can control the side thruster while the other operates the retros.

Scoring

Your final score is combination of a number of factors:

1. **ACCURACY:** How close you land to the center of the landing pad. The closer to the pad's center, the higher the score.
2. **DIFFICULTY:** Your selected landing velocity and whether or not you have selected WIND, both contribute to this factor.
3. **TIME:** The less time used, the higher your score.
4. **FUEL:** The less fuel used, the higher your score.

WANT TO PLAY AGAIN?

Press the OPTION key to replace IMPACT.

MIND DEMONS

STORY EXCERPT

Jake and Lisa are being led through a surrealistic carnival sideshow by the sinister Mr. Crump:

“The area in front of them became black . . . empty. The dim light from a kerosene lantern played across Crump’s thin features, accentuating the movement of his long fingers. He turned his palms over and as he slowly raised both his hands a thin line of light grew evenly upwards from the floor in front of them. The blackness lifted like a curtain, exposing a swirling, ebbing light that danced brilliantly before their eyes.

Crump twisted his head and looked up into their blank eyes. He rubbed his hands together and cackled. “So, my dearies, Letharge has hypnotized you.” He coughed, a shallow muffled cough. “It’s for your own good, you know.” Dribble seeped down his chin. “What you are about to see and experience is much easier when in a trance. Your subconscious will absorb . . . learn.” He cackled, then bent over and coughed, holding his fist to his mouth. He cleared his throat. “Consciousness distorts the truth.”



“I want to scream.” The thought flashed through Lisa’s mind. “Please let me scream. The smell, the filth . . . She wanted desperately to run . . . escape from her nightmare, but she was held in place by Crump’s greedy dark eyes.”

* * * * *

— *PREPARE TO MEET THE* —

MIND DEMONS

MIND DEMONS is a joystick-controlled arcade game that pits you against four nightmarish creatures in a race against time.

Your Worst Dreams Come True

Your worst dreams come true as you try to grab a symbol from the top of the playing field, put it in a treasure chest at the bottom, and race back for more.

Some Very Despicable Characters

The SNEAK THIEF wants to steal your symbol; the JOLLY ROGER wants to eat you for dinner; a BAT tries to fly off with each symbol, and your ALTER EGO is out to kill you.

You Have 3 Lives . . . But

Fortunately, you have three lives and are equipped with a laser weapon . . . but each second is precious. If your time runs out, you fall helplessly through a trap door into a bottomless pit.

The Only Way is Down

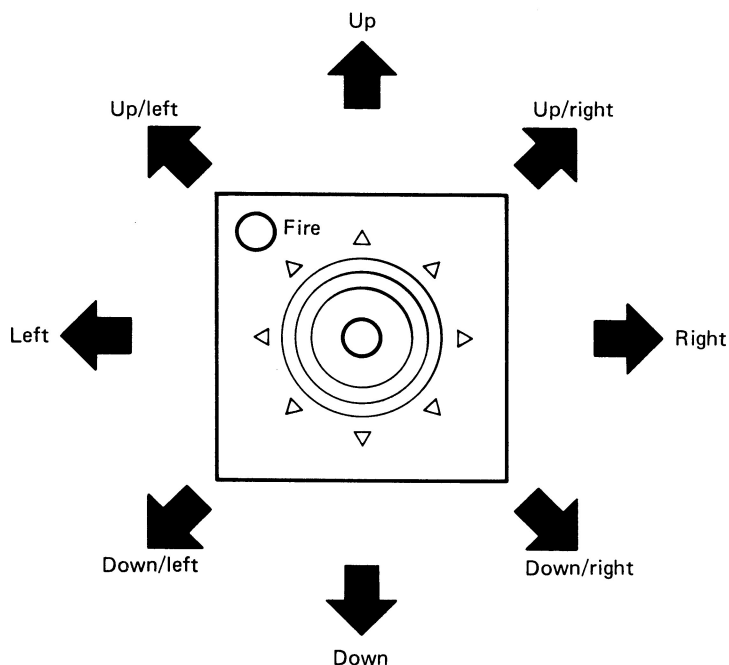
You must stay on the playing field at all costs. Don’t get too close to the edge! If you slip off, the only way is . . . down.

— *WELCOME TO YOUR INNER MIND.*

WELCOME TO MIND DEMONS! —

Joystick Control

Maneuver by pushing the joystick in the direction you want to travel as shown below:



Firing Your Laser

To fire your laser, push the red trigger button while pointing the joystick in the direction you want to fire.

Press START

Once your player appears on the playing field, freeze the action by pressing the CTRL and "1" keys. This will allow you to familiarize yourself with the display. (To continue, repeat this sequence.)

LEVEL, HIGH SCORE, SCORE AND TIME are displayed at the right of the screen. The object of MIND DEMONS is to progress through level 10, or reach the highest level possible with the highest score.

You begin each game with three (3) lives. Your lives remaining are represented by the figures at the bottom right of the screen.

TO PROGRESS TO A HIGHER LEVEL you must turn all four empty boxes gold, by either:

1. Taking four symbols and putting them in the empty boxes or,
2. Turning all of the boxes gold by touching them or,
3. Turning some of the boxes gold by touching them, and others by placing symbols in them.

But, regardless of which method you use, you *must* turn *all four (4) boxes gold* to progress to the next level.

TO PICK UP A SYMBOL: Touch the symbol with your player. Your player will turn from white to green when the symbol is in your possession.

TO PUT A SYMBOL IN A BOX: Touch the box with your player. The symbol will replace the box and your player will turn white.

TO TURN A BOX GOLD: Touch the box with your player and the box will turn gold.

You should fill as many boxes as possible with symbols because:

1. Each time you fill a box with a symbol, the timer that counts down from 30 to 0 at the beginning of each play cycle will reset back to 30.

If you don't fill a box with a symbol, the timer will not rest when you touch a box. When time runs out, you will lose one life as your player falls through the trap door into the pit.

2. Each time you fill a box with a symbol you will be awarded 40 points.

If you touch a box without possessing a symbol, no score is awarded.

All Those Nasty Creatures

Sneak Thief

The SNEAK THIEF appears in level 1 and in all subsequent levels. He will land on a symbol, pause for a few seconds, then disappear with the symbol unless you:

1. Shoot him, or
2. Touch him and snatch the symbol away before he disappears.

Jolly Roger

The JOLLY ROGER appears in level 3 and in all subsequent levels. He will attempt to gobble you up unless you:

1. Shoot him, or
2. RUN!

Bat

The BAT appears in level 4 and in all subsequent levels. He will land on a symbol and fly away with it unless you:

1. Shoot fast!

(The symbol will be returned to the playing field if you shoot the BAT before he leaves the screen with it.)

Alter Ego

Your ALTER EGO appears in level 6 and in all subsequent levels. He will chase you and try to shoot you unless you:

1. SHOOT HIM FIRST!

Scoring

EXTRA LIVES:

Each time you gain 1000 points, you will be awarded an extra life, up to a maximum of 5 lives. You can have only 5 lives at any time during the game.

Points are awarded for shooting the creatures:

SNEAK THIEF: 5 POINTS

JOLLY ROGER: 20 POINTS

BAT: 10 POINTS

ALTER EGO: 35 POINTS

Points are also awarded for:

1. FILLING A BOX WITH A SYMBOL: 40 POINTS
2. COMPLETION OF EACH LEVEL: 25 POINTS

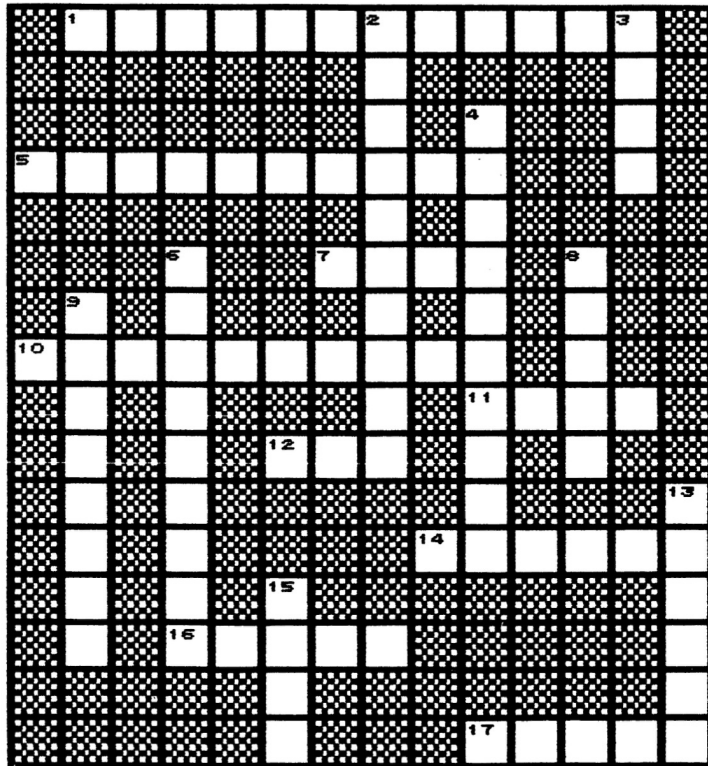
Total Awareness

Pass through level 10 and you've defeated the MIND DEMONS. I've done it. It's really possible! Have fun!

WANT TO PLAY AGAIN?

Press *START*!

CROSSWORD PUZZLE



ACROSS CLUES

1. AN ELITE GROUP
5. HE PROGRAMMED SPACE KNIGHTS
7. OUR HERO!!
10. THE BEST WINE IN THE UNIVERSE
11. OUR HEROINE!!
12. PLAYING AND READING SPACE KNIGHTS IS . . .
14. HIS PICTURE'S ON THE COVER
16. _____ IS THE PLACE
17. AN UGLY SERGEANT

DOWN CLUES

2. YOU MUST LEARN THIS TO TRAVEL IN SPACE
3. A CUTE FEMALE ROBOT
4. THE CREATOR AND WRITER OF SPACE KNIGHTS
6. FEARSOME PIRATES
8. ORACLE LIVES HERE
9. YOU MUST TRAVEL THROUGH THIS TO GO BACK IN TIME
13. NOT A NICE PLACE TO VISIT
15. HE MAKES THE BEST WINE IN THE UNIVERSE

Answers to Crossword Puzzle on page 155



Puzzle created using CROSSWORD MAGIC from L&S Computerware

David Heller
Robert Kurcina

SPACE KNIGHTS

Space Knights—a revolutionary new concept in computer software exclusively for ATARI® 400® and 800® Home Computer users, links adventure, science fiction, and the Atari® computer's superior sound, color and graphics capabilities!

Space Knights brings you a complete science fiction novel, 38 illustrations by renowned fantasy artist, Frank Cirocco, plus a diskette filled with exciting game programs that are ready for play action. While you're enjoying the adventures of Jake and Lisa, the two main characters in this fantasy, simply load a game program into your computer and experience space and time travel adventures yourself! This series of games will captivate and intrigue players of all ages. As you follow Jake and Lisa through a series of action-packed adventures and fast-paced simulations, you'll pit your skill and determination in challenging encounters against *Gammalon* space pirates; land your rocket on the surface of an alien planet like *Weomby*; or race through the *Corridor of Time*. The game *Navigate* teaches you fundamentals of vector trigonometry, then tests your skills in real-time simulation of space flight. *Bugs Buster*, *War Room* and *Mind Demons* are multilevel encounters designed for players of all ages.

One of the most exciting software packages around, *Space Knights* gets you into the action and keeps you there!

You'll need: Atari® Home Computer with 24K or 48K memory and disk drive. Some games require joysticks or paddles.

This package includes: book plus diskette.

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